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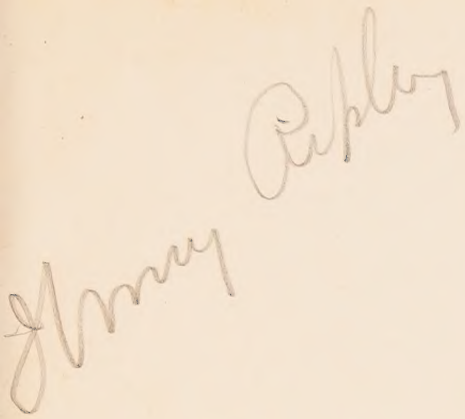

Henry Ripley

MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

A Novel.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

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MILLICENT'S CHILDREN.

CHAPTER I.

It was considerably after seven when Alan reached home. The time had passed so quickly when in Muriel's society that he had been unconscious of its flight, and was greatly surprised on consulting his watch, after leaving her, to find that, hurry home as he might, he would still be late. This knowledge, added to Muriel's inability to visit Stonecourt, did not improve his already vexed state of mind. Things, he decided, were conspiring together to put him out. If his horse was hot and bathed in froth and steam from its rapid gallop across country, no less hot, annoyed, and perplexed was Alan as he rushed up to his dressing-room.

"Has dinner gone in yet?" he inquired of his valet.

"No, sir; and there have been continual inquiries after you. The cook was in a regular fume, and said everything would be spoilt."

"Why did she not send it in then?" asked Alan. "What idiots they must be to wait for me. I cannot control time however much I may wish."

"No, sir," responded the man respectfully.

"Another collar, quick. What is to do with the things?" said Alan, throwing a couple down on the floor. "I must have these matters better looked after."

The man glanced at his master in surprise; his genial-mannered, sunny-tempered master. Had something vexed him?

"Is anything the matter with the collars, sir?"

"Look and see; the cuffs too. Dear, dear, the most haste the less speed. Was that the clock chiming?"

"Yes, sir; it is the half-hour."

Alan's face had not recovered its usual sunshine when he entered the drawing-room. His mother looked very grave.

"You are late, Alan," she remarked.

"I am, mother; I must apologize to you all for keeping you waiting so long."

"We will forgive you," answered Carrie, smiling her best at him.

She was radiant in pale pink. But he did not return the smile.

"Ah, I see a strange face," he said, going towards the piano. "Mrs. Stanhope, when did you come over?"

"I drove here this afternoon, and your mother would make me stay. I wanted to see Nora again; she is, you know, my only daughter."

"True; and a great treasure, I presume. Mrs.

Stanhope, there is the gong. Will you take my arm ?"

The last time he had offered it to any one was to Muriel, three hours ago. It occurred to him at once. The face he loved so well arose clear and distinct in his mind's eye; he saw her again. He remembered how she looked when she had overtaken him. His heart smote him for the bad temper he had displayed. It had not been much —but too much for him.

"How I wish she was here," he murmured to himself; "how different all things would look."

Sir Phillip Verdun gave his arm to Mrs. Murray, and Miss Verdun, Carrie, and Nora followed as they could—a nice family party.

"Did some one say you had been over to Astley Park, Mr. Murray?" inquired Mrs. Stanhope, playing with and crumbling her bread.

"Most probably they did; I have been there," replied Alan.

"Does not Miss Vivian reside with the Duerdons," continued the lady; "a very plain girl, who had a handsome brother. I saw them twice, and never forgot him."

"Miss Vivian does live there," answered Alan in one of his most stand-off tones.

"Is she as plain as ever, or has she improved?"

"You do me honour," said Alan; "I am no judge of beauty. Even if I were I should be sorry to praise one lady's face to another."

Mrs. Stanhope's long, thin countenance lighted

up. Evidently Alan, she thought, was not smitten with Miss Vivian. But with a strange persistence and singularly bad taste, she pursued the topic.

"I want to know your opinion," she simpered; "do you think Miss Vivian improved, or do you still think her plain?"

"I never did think her plain," answered Alan, assuming an air of indifference he was far from feeling. "Her face is too expressive to be plain."

"Of whom are you talking," asked Carrie from the other side. "Whose good looks are you discussing?"

"Miss Vivian's," answered Mrs. Stanhope.

"She has none," declared Carrie quickly; "Muriel is one of the plainest girls. She is, however, quite conscious of her deficiency, and never expects any one to admire her."

"I differ from you completely," put in Miss Verdun in her straightforward, blunt style. "Rarely is it I have seen a face that struck me as hers did. It is so refined and intelligent; and her expression varies so constantly, that she entirely enthrals one's attention. I agree that she has not a pretty doll-like style of beauty."

This was a rub for Carrie.

"I think Miss Verdun is right," lisped Nora Stanhope. "Muriel Vivian has an interesting face, and her eyes are so good that no one could call her plain."

Alan looked gratefully at Nora. She caught the glance and blushed. Nora was a nice girl; not

spoilt, though she was an only child, and had a mother who was decidedly not the most sensible of women.

"I think," declared Mrs. Murray from the head of the table, "that it is a pity Muriel is not here. She is a dear, good girl, and an especial favourite of mine. As to her looks, they are well worthy of discussion; she has a face that will bear reading. You will find few gentlemen who will not admire her. She is what is generally styled a gentleman's favourite."

"Oh, Mrs. Murray," uttered Carrie in deprecation, "how can you say so. You should hear what Mrs. Duerdon says about her."

"Sufficient for present thought is the beauty that graces our table," declared Alan gallantly, most anxious was he to give a turn to the conversation.

"But, Mr. Murray, you professed you were no judge," laughed Mrs. Stanhope. "You are caught by your own words."

"I know the style of face that suits me, and that is as much as I require," rejoined Alan.

He could not help glancing at Nora as he spoke. Carrie noticed his look, and turned pale. No intention had Carrie that any one should gain an admiring look from Alan save herself.

"Does any one here remember Norman Vivian?" asked Nora presently. "He had the most beautiful face I ever saw; the most beautiful at times—when he smiled I think it was. Alan, you must recollect him."

Alan nodded.

"Most of us do, I think," he replied.

"His death was dreadfully sad," pursued Miss Stanhope. "I believe they feared Muriel would have gone out of her mind at the time. By the way, I speak of Miss Vivian as if she were a dear friend of mine, whereas I have only met her two or three times. She is not a kind of girl either whom one gets to know quickly."

Alan made no response; he was wondering just then what Muriel was doing. At that very time she was sitting by herself in the schoolroom singing. It was seldom she left Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon in the evening, but she was tired; and she escaped to her dear sitting-room for a quiet half-hour. Dear; yes the schoolroom had become that again to her. She no longer felt sad when there. Sometimes, it is true, she thought of Norman and his merry laugh; she could almost hear it in fancy. Nevermore on this earth could she hear it, or meet again his beaming glance; no, not on earth, but in heaven. She would see him again some day. She was singing one of his songs. The time had come when she liked to sing those he had preferred. So engrossed was she that she never heard a knock at the door. Again it sounded; still no answer. At last it opened, and Major walked in. She was dressed in outdoor costume, with her bonnet and cloak on. But Muriel thought nothing of this; she was accustomed to Major going out

pretty frequently. The maid had nearly all her own way.

"I have come to say good-bye, Miss Muriel," blurted out the woman without any preamble; "I am going to leave to-night."

"To leave! to-night!" repeated Muriel in amazement; "not leave for altogether. Surely it is very sudden."

"It is sudden, Miss Muriel; but Mrs. Duerdon has let me off. I could not bear to leave the old place without saying a word or two to you before I go. I am glad you are in here all alone; it looks almost providential like."

"How radiant you look, Major. You are not, I verily believe, sorry to give us up after all the years you have spent here, and we shall be sorry to lose you. To leave so sudden too."

"I am both sorry and glad, if you can understand the contradiction. You say I look radiant, Miss Muriel, but I cannot tell what to compare you to—it must be something pure and fair and spotless. I made that white dress you have on, and I shall never make you another."

There was a tone of deep regret in Major's voice.

"Perhaps you may," rejoined Muriel cheerfully. "Stranger things happen in this world."

Major shook her head incredulously.

"That will never happen, for I am going into Suffolk. But this much I will say—nobody can work for a nicer young lady."

"Still, Major, if you recollect there was a time when you thought quite differently," replied Muriel quietly. "Sit down though, you will be tired."

"Thank you, Miss Vivian; I will take a seat at your bidding, but I am not going far to-night. Robert has a married sister living a little beyond Jycliffe, with whom I am going to spend a fortnight. You have heard me speak of Robert. Well, he has come back after all these years, and he has grown such a gentleman. He is well off too—quite independent; and I shall keep servants of my own. I am glad we shall not have to go back to Australia, it's such an immense distance from here."

"Then I have seen him," said Muriel quickly, the meeting in the Park, which she had until then forgotten, flashing across her memory. "He has a nice, kind countenance, Major, and I trust you will be happy."

"No fear but that I shall," replied the maid, holding up her head proudly. "Robert's one of the right down good sort."

"Did you expect him to come for you in the way he has done?" inquired Muriel, inwardly wondering greatly how Mrs. Duerdon had been brought to allow Major's departure.

"No; there was some mistake in his last letter to me. He sent to say he was coming home, and that I was to look out for him in July. So of course, never hearing, I concluded he was busy,

and would write soon. Instead of that he turned up this afternoon, and you might have knocked me down with a feather as the saying is."

"He came before July too."

"Yes, a few days, but he thought it was better to come sooner than later. He knew how anxious I should be. It's vexing for Mrs. Duerdon, I know, and she's rare and rampageous; but there, I did not come to speak about her," continued Major with a sigh, "but about yourself, Miss Muriel. I want to ask your pardon for the way I used to treat you. I should like to hear your sweet voice tell me that when you think of Major Andrews you will think of her with kindness."

"I can promise that most heartily," replied Muriel warmly. "Dear, kind Major, I have much to thank you for, more especially for your attention to Norman at the last; many little attentions you showed him which he appreciated."

"Don't mention it, Miss Muriel," said Major, with a suspicious catching of the breath that sounded strangely like a sob. "Do not mention anything I did for that there blessed angel. If ever a saint walked the earth it were our bright Master Norman."

In her excitement Major was quite forgetting her grammar. When careful she could speak well, but if the least flurried her old mistakes would creep out.

Tears rained down Muriel's face, but they were not tears of sorrow.

"Will you shake hands now that I am speaking to you in all probability for the last time?" entreated Major humbly. "I shall take it as a great honour. I have often wondered whether you thought well enough of me after my behaviour in the past to let your hand rest in mine."

"Oh, Major!" uttered Muriel reproachfully, "what cause can I have given you to doubt me? Have I failed in courtesy? Long ago was any little unkind act of yours forgotten by me."

"You have always been most thoughtful and kind," rejoined Major hastily. "It was not *your* manner, but it was *my* conscience. I expect that would not let me rest. That conscience that Mr. Mervin tells us about sometimes, and so for the matter of that does his curate, Mr. Maitland. Mr. Maitland's a nice gentleman, Miss Muriel."

"I daresay he is, Major," replied Muriel with a smile, wondering slightly at the same time, it must be confessed, what occasioned the remark, and the deep significance of tone and manner that accompanied it.

"Well, I am only keeping you, and Robert will also think me long," said Major. "I wish you a long good-bye, Miss Muriel, and a happier future than the past has been—a future crowned with love and joy."

"I cannot do better than echo your good wish," said Muriel, moved more than she cared to show. "Thank you much. Do not be afraid to shake my hand well. It shows you are hearty in your sentiments."

And truly if a strong clasp and a hearty, firm hand shake were any criterion to go by as to warmth of feeling and trueness of heart, Muriel might feel gratified.

"There is no one in the house that I shall miss as I shall miss you," said Major, having recourse to her handkerchief. "You are always so quiet and ladylike, so calm and reliable. It was like peace after a storm seeing you any time when I had had a row with Mrs. Duerdon."

"Ah, Mrs. Duerdon spoilt you," smiled Muriel. "Good-bye, Major."

And at last Major disappeared, but not until she had returned two or three times to the schoolroom. She would go out of the door, and Muriel would think she had gone, but the next minute she was back again. After three of these returns she contented herself with putting her head into the room. This was the last Muriel saw of Major, but not the last she heard.

When she returned to the drawing-room she found Mrs. Duerdon in sad lamentations and bewailings. The room was filled with her moanings.

"There never was such an unfortunate creature in the world as I am," she groaned. "Every one that is of the least use to me goes and gets married or leaves."

"Major has been with you many years, Aunt Clara," answered Muriel cheerfully. "She deserves to better herself now."

"She has been with me eleven years or so. All the more reason she should have been satis-

fied, and remained with me as long as I wanted her."

"Women will get married," said Mr. Duerdon with a smile. "They never know when they are well off."

"That is true," responded Mrs. Duerdon lachrymosely. "If I had not married Major would not have left me."

Mr. Duerdon laughed aloud.

"The question seems to me, not whether it was well that you married, but whether it is advisable that Major should do so. I cannot see that your having been single would have affected her movements."

"Such a treasure as she was," moaned Mrs. Duerdon, declining to enter into any argument.

"You will find plenty of treasures if you only set about getting them in the right way."

"But what am I to do in the meanwhile? I have no maid, and no one to care for me. It is always the same with me; everything goes wrong."

"I will be your maid with pleasure if you care to accept my services," said Muriel with a pleasant smile. "I can do famously if you will only try."

"Your services!" retorted Mrs. Duerdon contemptuously. "I should be worse with them than without them I expect. Sarah can do for me if you will spare her."

Muriel laughed quietly, in no way put out by the disparagement to herself.

"You are perfectly welcome to Sarah if you

prefer her, Aunt Clara, but I fancy, without any undue praise to myself, that I should do best. Sarah is extremely obliging and willing, but she has none of the polish requisite for a lady's maid."

"Which said polish we may safely infer you possess, eh?" interrogated Mr. Duerdon.

Again Muriel laughed.

Perhaps she tried by cheerfulness to raise Mrs. Duerdon's spirits, but if such was her motive she failed miserably. There was only one mood for Mrs. Duerdon that evening, and that was most utter discontent.

Mr. Duerdon fidgeted over it at last. He had tried by every artifice to coax his wife to a better humour long before Muriel joined them.

"Well, Clara," he declared irritably, "you have been too bad over this business. Major has gone, and you can make no worse of it. Try and make the best, and you will find yourself more relieved."

"I would never have let her gone if I could have helped myself," murmured Mrs. Duerdon fretfully, "but she handed her month's money back as coolly as you please, and said, 'A month's money or month's warning was our agreement. I tender my money back, and am no longer your servant.'"

"You did not, of course, accept the money, Clara."

"Did I not though. Of course I did, and gave her my mind besides. She did not get off free I can tell you."

Mr. Duerdon sighed. But he said no more. He knew the uselessness of trying to reason with his wife.

After he had left the room Muriel said pleasantly—

"Well, Aunt Clara, who is to be your maid, Sarah or I?"

"I suppose I shall have to try you," was the ungracious reply. "I guess beforehand how helpless you will be."

"I enter on my duties at once then," said Muriel smiling. "But Aunt Clara, I think the terms of my agreement had better be less binding even than were Major's. Suppose we say a day's notice or a day's wages."

"You can settle it as you like so long as you do your best," replied Mrs. Duerdon. "Of all the vexatious, annoying things that could have happened was Major's leaving. Just at the very time, too, when she was going to make me a crimson velvet dress. There is only one comfort in it all; Madame Christian can make it as well. We must drive over to Jycliffe to-morrow and see after her. If I am not well enough you must go for me."

CHAPTER II.

Some weeks later and July was thinking of taking its departure and giving August a chance. Carrie Danvers had come to live at the Vicarage. Her grandfather was ageing rapidly; he had become morose almost since his wife's death. Always silent and somewhat reserved, he daily grew more so. Miss Caroline did not find the quiet, uneventful life she spent there agreeable at all to her feelings.

"If it were not that I made friends for myself long ago," she soliloquised, "I might just as well be buried alive as vegetate here. The monotony of existence would be unbearable. True, there is Mr. Maitland; he does as a *dernier ressort*, or for a mere *pour passer le temps*, and there is last, but not least, the chance of seeing Alan Murray. Bonny, handsome Alan. I used to think one time that he rode over to Astley a great deal, but I must have been mistaken, for I never see him now, and Muriel would mention him, that she would. She would only be too proud to boast that he came to see them. One thing is certain, Muriel shall never gain such a prize. Not that there is any fear. No, Alan has better taste than that, and even if he had not I would take care that Muriel did not get him. Sly, underhand Muriel;

I never liked her. Well, yes, I perhaps once did, but I don't now. Fancy her thinking of Alan, the plain, old-fashioned thing. What was that that Alan said that evening about good looks? I cannot exactly recall his words, but his face, his expression, can I ever forget that. Oh, Alan, Alan, how I love you!"

And Carrie clasped her hands together almost to pain.

She stood in the garden, and a pretty picture she made, her soft muslin dress setting off to perfection the fair loveliness of her face. A gentleman stood for an instant leaning on the large iron gate at the entrance to the Vicarage grounds watching her. He was a great admirer of beauty, and Caroline Danvers' beauty caught his eye, not his heart. No, not his heart; he was too sensible a man for that. Carrie caught sight of him.

"Ah, is that you, Mr. Maitland?" she asked coquettishly, hastening to meet him. "I think we are going to have rain. Will you come in the house?"

"Not this morning, Miss Danvers. My time is —is not quite my own—at least part of it is not," stammered Mr. Maitland.

He was a small man, pale-eyed, fair-haired, nervous in manner, but only in manner. He was a good-hearted, sensible man, quite at ease with gentlemen, but diffident and bashful with ladies. He was well aware of his deficiency; much as he admired the fair sex at a distance he preferred

keeping them there; or if he thought he could conquer his defect and drew near again, it was but to meet with further defeat. The ladies only laughed at him, none more so than Caroline, though at times, when she feared he was going to withdraw from her charms, she put on coquettish airs, and veiled her mirth until she won him round again.

"What important business have you to execute this morning?" inquired Caroline, with an air of interest well assumed, but unreal. "You really must stay if you can. I am ready to die of ennui."

"I am afraid my presence would fail to dispel the feeling," returned Mr. Maitland humbly. "Can you not do anything for your grandfather, Miss Danvers? I came to see if I could help him in any way."

"Oh, grandpapa, is quite a hermit," replied Carrie, scornfully. "He likes his own company best—solitude and a pipe are all that he requires. Give him those, and he is happy. Mr. Maitland, you did not come to see me, then?" Carrie raised her eyes, lovely and brilliant, to the curate's face, admiration and coquetry in their glance. It was too much for Mr. Maitland. He blushed, actually blushed, at the vision of beauty before him. Blushing was a weakness of Mr. Maitland's, a weakness which he would have given a great deal to overcome.

"No, no, I did not—did not come to see you," frankly owned the curate. "I did not want—wish to see you. The last time I was here Miss Carrie,

you were—were not over-polite—you—you laughed at me."

"Oh, Mr. Maitland, come, come, you are too imaginative, too sensitive. You positively imagine things."

Mr. Maitland shook his head dissentingly.

"Not so, Miss Carrie, my perceptions are—are strong."

"Where have you to go this morning?" asked Miss Danvers presently, in not the most amiable manner. "What particular business have you on hand so that you cannot stay and scatter some of my weariness?"

"Be brave, Miss Danvers, and scatter it for yourself. Visit the sick and poor, read to them, help them, and you will be happier."

And it was noticeable in Mr. Maitland's speech that he had not hesitated once. The fact was the good man had forgotten himself. His heart spoke then, not his manner.

"I should think so; thank you for the chance," retorted Caroline, contemptuously. "Visit a lot of dirty, ignorant people, whom I would not touch with the tongs. Read to a set of idiots who would not understand one word in ten. Thank you, try if you cannot suggest something else."

Mr. Maitland looked inexpressibly shocked, as well he might.

"You forget, Miss Carrie, that they are created by the same Creator who formed us," he answered, reverently. "If they are ignorant may it not be our fault?"

"Oh, let us change our topic," exclaimed Caroline, warmly, "or we shall disagree most certainly; get Muriel Vivian to do those little horrid things you suggested to me. She is well fitted for such low work."

"Pardon me," said Mr. Maitland, gravely. "You err there, Miss Danvers; my work is the highest, the very highest that this earth can afford. The work of saving souls for heaven for my beloved Master. I glory in it. Miss Vivian is, as you remarked just now, well fitted to help me. She is the nicest young lady I have ever seen—the best—the most considerate."

"Umph! Pretty cool of the man speaking in that tone to me. He is not so soft as I thought," inwardly commented Carrie. Aloud she said—"I am glad you have found some one to admire, Mr. Maitland; more especially poor Muriel Vivian, it will be quite a Godsend to her. I will congratulate her the next time we meet."

Mr. Maitland coloured to the very roots of his hair. "I do not—not think that it—it will be—any—any news to her," he stammered, in the greatest confusion. "Miss Vivian must know that—that she commands—the—the respect of—of every sensible man. I am sure that she—she calls for my—my esteem—and admiration."

"Good-morning, then, Mr. Maitland," rejoined Carrie, coolly. "I will not be the one to keep you away from one whom you value so highly."

But Mr. Maitland did not call that morning nor for several days after at Astley Park. The very

consciousness of his desire to go there, the great longing that he had to see Muriel restrained him. To say that he loved the solitary, gentle girl, would be but expressing faintly the feelings that he had for Muriel. His was a kind of grateful nature that valued even beyond its due all goodness shown to him. Muriel's quiet consideration had early won his regard—a regard that quickly ripened into love, and from love opened into adoration—worship. What to him was the hopelessness of his passion? Nothing—a mere nothing. It did but help to increase the depth and power of each unexpressed feeling. There are such natures. Well for them and for the world that they are rare.

> Love for a year, a week, a day,
> But alas for the love that lives alway.

These words applied well to his character. Whether Mr. Maitland would have made up his mind to go to the house where his earthly divinity dwelt is a question, a question which we are not called upon to answer. By chance, if there may be such a thing, he happened to meet her a few days later coming out of a cottage. With a meekness and quietness duly characteristic of the orphan girl, she would have given a polite bow and passed Mr. Maitland by. This he could not suffer. Pulling off his low-crowned hat speedily with one hand, he held the other out to her. She seemed pleased.

"Good-morning, Mr. Maitland," she said, with a pleasant smile. "You are quite a stranger. Are you so busy in the parish that you have not time

to give us a call? We are always, you know, pleased to see you."

The colour came and went in the curate's face. He was in the seventh heaven of delight. Not only to be in her presence, but to be spoken to so graciously.

"I—I—did not know—I did not indeed—I will come—this very—very afternoon. I shall be so glad."

"I will tell Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon," replied Muriel, kindly, "and we shall all look out for you. Will you join us at dinner, we can have croquet afterwards."

"I will with pleasure," said Mr. Maitland, wondering whether the sun was really shining more brightly or whether it was a sunshine in his heart that he had never felt before. Was the world growing happier, or was it that he alone felt happier? He could not tell. He could not—would not analyse too deeply just then. Sufficient for him was the bliss at his heart. And Muriel stood by in all unconsciousness of the true state of his feelings. Rarely wanting in conceit ever was she. In the total absence of self-consciousness lay one of her principal charms. In her true refinement of feeling, her anxiety to spare other people, she quite forgot herself, and thus never thought of such a thing as being loved. It is probable, likewise, that many a more conceited girl, a more self-conscious one, might have failed to detect the presence of passion in Mr. Maitland's

attentions. In his bashful, shrinking timidity he always appeared to disadvantage. Muriel only saw in him a good conscientious man, one who deserved esteem and encouragement in his labours—labours, which she knew and heard were so regularly and unshrinkingly performed.

"We may expect you then," she said, holding out her hand in parting. "Widow Grimes is looking forward to seeing you, Mr. Maitland. I cannot think what knack you have to reach their hearts so effectually."

This, she said kindly, to put the worthy curate more at his ease. He gazed after her as she walked away with never a backward glance. He noted the neat figure, the simple brown holland dress, without one single adornment, the large Gainsborough hat which covered the loveliest face in the world to him. What mattered Caroline Danvers' beauty then? Where could the comparison be made? Surely hers was but skin-deep, while Muriel Vivian's was a beauty of the heart which should never, never fade. A modest, pure, guileless girl, whom any man might think it an honour to win. A brave, noble girl, who would brighten any man's home, and gild it with a glory that no lovely face—lovely in itself that is—could ever hope to do.

"I do not know," he said, turning away as Muriel disappeared out of sight, "I do not know how I reach the hearts of the poor. But would Miss Vivian could teach me the way to her heart.

Teach me how to win an abiding place there. I would shelter her from all this world's storms—together we would strive to reach that heaven where all is bliss for ever. What a glorious prospect! What a joyful future!"

Muriel told Mrs. Duerdon of her meeting Mr. Maitland in the village, and of her invitation to him. Mrs. Duerdon was in her dressing-room, wandering restlessly about.

"I cannot tell where Major kept my things," she declared, irritably. "Everything seems wrong. Oh, you met Mr. Maitland, did you; a nice sensible young man, I believe, but his appearance is sadly against him, and when he opens his mouth he makes a regular simpleton of himself."

"Not in church," dissented Muriel. "He is so earnest and grave there that every one likes him, and the poor people, one and all, dote on his very name."

"Do you know what I was thinking the other day?" asked Mrs. Duerdon. "There, Muriel, look quick, and do my hair. Well, it struck me what a good thing it would be if you could care for him."

"Care for him?" echoed Muriel, unsuspiciously. "I do care for him—I esteem him greatly."

"Do not be so simple, Muriel," rejoined Mrs. Duerdon, crossly. "Any stranger might easily put you down as being not quite sharp; or, at any rate, think that you had been brought up in a nunnery. Why, bless the child, I mean love Mr. Maitland."

"Oh, Aunt Clara," said Muriel, deprecatingly, "how can you talk so. I never think of such things," and the colour rushed o'er cheek and neck and brow. Mrs. Duerdon twisted her hair impatiently out of the girl's hands—

"How awkward you are!" she exclaimed hotly, "I suppose all on account of what I just said. But let me tell you this, Muriel, thinking of these things does not alter facts. So long as this world continues people will, I presume, marry and be given in marriage."

"I suppose they will," was the gentle reply. "But love and marriage are not for me. Let me brush your hair again, Aunt Clara, I will try to do it more to your satisfaction."

"I hope my new maid will suit," remarked Mrs. Duerdon, submitting herself once more to Muriel's tender mercies. "She comes to-morrow. By the way, you must write a line by this evening's post, I do not know, Muriel, though that love and marriage are not for you, as you just now graphically explained yourself. Of course you are very plain, and decidedly untaking in your manner, but there's your money, many men would be pleased to take you for that—Mr. Maitland for instance—I daresay he's not too well off, curates seldom are."

"Aunt Clara," exclaimed Muriel, indignantly, "you mean that I can get married for my money. For shame to speak so! Do you think I would allow such a thing? Never! You ought to beg

Mr. Maitland's pardon too. Disposing of him in that way. Why should he not have as nice a wife as anybody else?"

"His want of appearance is on a par with your own," returned Mrs. Duerdon, equably. "He would not be a great catch."

"Yet he is a man of good family, I heard," said Muriel, quietly, her short feeling of indignation gone. "Do you not think it is possible, Aunt Clara, that you rate beauty too highly?"

No word of protest uttered she at the low estimation in which Mrs. Duerdon held her; no word of that lady's own exceeding plainness suffered she to escape her lips, yet many a one might well have done so. She bore it meekly, patiently. Perhaps she agreed in the verdict pronounced against herself. Probably she was unconscious of the great beauty of disposition which she possessed.

"No," said Mrs. Duerdon, to herself, later on, complacently surveying herself in the looking-glass, Muriel having gone to change her own dress, "no, it's a most fortunate thing that Dr. Green left Muriel his money. He was a man of keen penetration. His little sum and that which Fred will, of course, give her may make her attractive to some one. She is a good girl in her way, and deserves to be happy, but between ourselves she is very plain and unstylish. She will never make a great match; we cannot expect it. Heigho, I shall miss her; she manages to look well after me. I do not know

that I will encourage that stammering Mr. Maitland. He's evidently smitten. What a simpleton he makes of himself sitting and staring at her as he does! I do not believe Muriel sees it; she is as simple as he—a couple of unworldly idiots. It is a mercy that he can preach, or else one would naturally take him for a *non compos*," with which uncomplimentary remark at other people's expense Mrs. Duerdon sailed, as well as she in her small, undignified way was able, downstairs.

CHAPTER III.

Muriel was not placed more at ease in her intercourse with Mr. Maitland after the conversation of the morning. On the contrary, when he arrived, all smiles and graciousness, she for the first time in her life felt a restraint in his presence, a reserve that she vainly endeavoured to overcome. The curate noted the alteration immediately. He was quick in observation, sensitive to the slightest change. He fell headlong from the heights of happiness into the depths of despair.

"I was mad, imbecile, lunatic," he inwardly commented, "to think that that sweet creature looked on me more favourably. It was only her amiable, considerate disposition which made her kind to all alike. God bless her, how fair she is! how beauteous in my eyes!"

Muriel, however, was not looking her best that evening; several things together combined to render her unhappy. Alan's absence was one great trouble just then. He had scarcely been over since the day Muriel declined his invitation to Stonecourt. Then Mrs. Duerdon's remarks about Mr. Maitland had added to this trouble and had opened her eyes to a possibility of undesirable things. Altogether she felt miserable, and she looked constrained and uncomfortable. No gentle smile illumined her face, no varying expression

played as usual over the mobile features; instead, the don't-care look had partly returned, the look of old which had almost habitually been hers, but which for a long time seemed to have left her.

Mr. Maitland summoned up courage and spoke once, twice. At last she heard.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Maitland, I quite agree with you," she said, coldly; "I think September is the nicest month in the year."

But if she had said she differed from him ten times over, she could scarcely have said it more distantly and unpleasantly, so unlike her natural self.

Mr. Maitland became more dejected and miserable; consequently he appeared to greater disadvantage than usual, which was a pity, for he was a good man, a worthy man at heart. Few better men than Gerald Maitland walked the earth. He left early, completely unable to bear his snubbing hopefully or manfully; and then Muriel's heart began to smite her with remorse. She was conscious that she had not altogether acted as she would wish others should act to her.

"What has Maitland done to offend you, Muriel?" inquired Mr. Duerdon as she was leaving the drawing-room for the night. "Has he proposed and been rejected, eh, my dear? What was it? You were enough to freeze any one. I quite pitied him."

Muriel coloured exceedingly.

"I scarcely know what has been the matter with me," she replied, heartily ashamed of her-

self. "He has not proposed, neither do I think he means to do, but I feared he might, and that made me behave as I did."

"Refused his hand before he offered it, eh? Foolish Muriel. Don't let thoughts of such unlikely proposals mar your happiness, my child; behave courteously, kindly to all, as it is your general way to do. Your behaviour of this evening was calculated to make a good man miserable, and that, I know, was not your wish."

"Most decidedly not. Mr. Duerdon, do you think it unlikely that any one will ever love me? Am I so very disagreeable and unlovable?" asked Muriel, quite wistfully.

"My dear child, what can have put such extraordinary and improbable notions into that sensible little head of yours?" said Mr. Duerdon, laying his hand kindly on hers. "Of course plenty will love you. But what should we all do without our gentle, quiet Muriel?"

"Oh, no, no," murmured Muriel, deprecatingly.

"The most lovable, unselfish girl that ever cheered any one's home," continued Mr. Duerdon. "My own loved child; adopted, it is true, but none the less mine in heart. Muriel, have you ever read 'Queechy'?" She bowed her head in assent, too much touched with emotion to speak. "Well, you will remember Fleda's mother prayed a most beautiful prayer; it was to the effect that her orphan child might be kept unspotted from the world. You remember it."

"Yes, I remember it well."

"I often think your mother must have prayed that prayer for you and dear Norman, for never have I seen two children of whom it could be more truly said, 'Amidst wealth and luxury you both grew up so guileless and spotless.'"

"You say that, Mr. Duerdon, of me; of course I know it was true of my brother. You still think kindly and well of me after my unladylike conduct of this evening, after my many faults. You are too kind. No one else, I fear, will endorse your good opinion. I am not strong and independent in character, Uncle Fred. I feel as if I should like people to love and care for me."

"What need to distress yourself unnecessarily?" replied Mr. Duerdon; "to know you is to love you. Think how your aunt and I care for you; think of Alan, Mr. Maitland, and everybody. Why, Muriel," he continued, gaily, "I am afraid you trouble yourself on the wrong score. Your difficulty will arise from having too many anxious to gain your good opinion, your love."

"Not Mr. Maitland among the rest, I trust most sincerely," responded Muriel, with a soft laugh.

She was cheered, comforted by Mr. Duerdon's kind words.

"No, not Mr. Maitland, we must hope," rejoined Mr. Duerdon, quickly, "for he would scarcely do for our winsome Muriel. He is a good and worthy man, I verily believe, but he must not mate with our pearl."

"I shall not want to mate with any one," said Muriel, quickly, her affections taking another turn, and walking slowly away. "I will ever stay with you and Aunt Clara; my home shall be always with you both."

"So you think now, sweet girl," said Mr. Duerdon to himself, "but you will change your mind by-and-bye. That handsome Alan is not the fine fellow I take him for if he does not win you. Poor Mr. Maitland! he will have to recover as best he can. I should have liked her to have married a clergyman well enough, but not a man of Mr. Maitland's appearance and manners. No, Alan will do best."

It was scarcely a week later that Muriel met Mr. Maitland again. Anxious to atone for her previous coldness, she put on her most pleasant smiles; she laughed and talked freely. Mr. Maitland took heart; he grew lively and cheerful.

"May I walk home with you?" he asked; "I was coming to see Mrs. Duerdon. I am going to leave Astley, Miss Vivian; I have had a small living presented to me."

"But I thought you were going to remain with Mr. Mervin for some time. In fact, I thought your departure was indefinitely fixed."

"So it was: but Mr. Ernest Mervin, who was, you are—are, I daresay, aware—ordained at the —the last Trinity ordination—is coming home—coming home to help his father."

"He is not going to be a tutor to Lord Ransfield's sons then?" questioned Muriel, surprised.

"No; that engagement has broken through. I think Mr. Ernest cares for you, Miss Vivian, at least I am sure he does. He always asks so many questions about you in his letters."

"Certainly he cares for me," agreed Muriel most candidly; "we grew up together—he is almost like a brother. Oh yes, Ernest and I were always good friends."

"That is not the way in which he thinks of you," continued Mr. Maitland eagerly. "He—he—loves you, Miss Vivian; he—he told me so."

"I should scarcely think he wished you to make me your confidante in his love affairs," replied Muriel coldly. "Ernest Mervin and I are friends, nothing more, or ever shall be." Then anxious to change the topic she said, "Will your new Vicarage be a pleasant home, Mr. Maitland. Is it prettily situated?"

"It is almost perfect," he answered readily. "Will you—you not—go and see it—see it, Miss Vivian. I should be so—so proud and delighted to—to welcome you there."

"Thank you much; perhaps we may come some time. It is not so very far off, I think I heard."

"Only about thirty miles."

"I am glad it promises to be such a happy home for you; and if you win the hearts of the poor there as you have done here, Mr. Maitland, you will be a happy man."

Muriel thought by this speech that she had quite made up for her shortcomings of the other evening.

"It would be—be a happy, happy home, Miss—Miss Vivian, if you—would come and—and be my—that is, if you would come—come and share it—share it with me. Oh say—say you will," pleaded Mr. Maitland eagerly.

To describe Muriel's startled expression is beyond description. She felt as if she wished the earth would open and swallow her. Oh, that she had wings to fly away. But there was nothing for it but to face it out bravely. The declaration was most unexpected; Mr. Maitland's allusions to Ernest had misled her.

"I am very sorry—exceedingly sorry," she said, looking down and hesitating and not knowing what to say; "I do not—cannot—I will"—

"Do not refuse to try and care—and care for me," interrupted Mr. Maitland excitedly. "I love you, Miss Vivian; I almost worship you, I believe. Do give me some encouragement."

"I cannot understand it," answered Muriel, full of distress; "I have never done anything to gain your—your respect."

"My love," he put in, but she paid no attention.

"We are nearing the house," she added, "and I must be brief. I cannot say how grieved I am, but I could not think of—of accepting your proposal. But do not think I refuse it lightly, Mr. Maitland. I quite appreciate the honour you

do me, and I am glad—yes, I am actually glad that I have won the regard of so good and conscientious a man."

He seized her hand and pressed it eagerly to his lips, but she drew it away.

"You are an angel," he said.

"Not yet, not yet," answered Muriel. "No, Mr. Maitland, you are mistaken in me. I am only a faulty, imperfect girl, who needs much correction to walk aright."

"Let mine be the voice to exhort—mine the heart to uphold," petitioned Mr. Maitland with great fervour. "I will aid you in every strife—I will, will bear all your troubles. Only give me hope."

"It cannot be," replied Muriel very gently, but very firmly. "Please say no more; let my answer be taken as final."

He bowed his head in acquiescence, and nearly groaned aloud. It was a bitter blow to him. He was a man to whom love had been rare. Muriel held out her hand in all kindness.

"I am deeply grieved to have been the one to occasion you sorrow," she said simply; "but perhaps I may remind you, in all humility, that it may be for the best. You will some day gain the love of some one far nobler and better than I, and you will be happy."

"Never, never," he said, in a low tone.

"And you know, Mr. Maitland, that I shall always be pleased to class you among my best

friends; I esteem your goodness so highly. Some day, if you will invite Mrs. Duerdon and me, we shall be most happy to come and see you."

He pressed the hand which she had given him, and which he had not released.

"I shall be—deli'hted—delighted to see you any—any and every time—would that it could be always. Yet it could not be—be expected—that earth was to be—to be made into—a heaven. I will call another day on Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon: I am—am unmanned to-day. You will see me—see me once more Miss—Vivian; see me until I leave."

"We shall be pleased to see you whenever you call. I will be present most certainly."

Muriel walked on slowly to the house after Mr. Maitland left her, her heart full of pain. She could not help feeling how strangely the events of this life were ordered. When she reached the hall door she changed her mind and turned away. She felt as if she could not enter—her heart was heavy, her breath stifling; so she wandered into the large gardens.

"I wonder," she said to herself, after some deliberation, "I wonder if Alan had talked to me as Mr. Maitland was beginning to do, I wonder what I should have done. Oh, Alan, my friend, my brother," and she covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Alan, have I offended you that you so rarely come now."

It was lucky she did not speak aloud for steps

sounded close behind her, and she jumped up only to meet him.

"Alan," she said in some confusion, "where have you sprung up from? When did you come? Are you "—

"One question at a time, Murie. Where have I sprung from? From Stonecourt certainly; where else did you expect me to come from? When did I arrive? Just now, and I met your fascinating curate rushing down the drive like wildfire. He glared at me in the oddest way; I think he was wrong in his head, in fact, I am sure he was. It's the only way of accounting for his behaviour. I would have stopped and spoken to him, but he would not allow me."

"Perhaps he did not know you," hazarded Muriel, with a face like crimson.

"Not know my grandfather," replied Alan contemptuously; "why, I know the fellow well enough, we are always meeting; and I am not so small in all conscience that he could overlook me. If it had been the other way on there might have been some excuse. Come into the arbour Murie, and let's sit down there for a while, come along. Why, what's the matter with you my—my—what's to do with your face."

Well might he ask. Never had she had such a colour since he had known her. But his question only confused her more. She made no answer.

"Were it not for the utter absurdity and unlikelihood of such a proceeding Murie, I should

declare that that fellow had been proposing to you this morning."

Her eyes fell, but only for an instant. She did not want him to know that his remark had been a literal and positive fact.

"What fellow?"

"Maitland to be sure. How many more have you eligible for such offers?"

"How many more eligible and unlikely ones do you mean?" she asked gaily. "Oh, scores I daresay."

"Can you explain an enigma to me, Murie—one which I cannot solve for myself, I must confess. Why is it that young ladies are always partial to curates?"

"Are they always partial to curates, Alan?" asked the young girl, raising her large eyes bravely to his face.

His blue ones met hers in return, kindly, fondly. He guessed something of the situation.

"Invariably it is so, but of course there are exceptions," he answered meaningly.

Her eyes drooped again directly. She feared he had guessed her secret.

"Caroline Danvers is at the Vicarage now, is she not?" inquired Alan presently. "Do you see much of her?"

"Not very much, but I saw her some days ago. I took tea at the Vicarage. She was most anxious about you Alan. I fancy you must be a great favourite of hers by the numerous questions she

kept putting to me. She wanted to know if you ever came over, and which was the most likely hour to meet you."

"Good gracious! You never told her?"

"I could not, Alan. Your coming is so uncertain. Lately you have scarcely been at all, and so I told her."

"What answer did the lovely Caroline make?"

"She seemed more satisfied, but she made me promise that I would do my best to persuade you to call there the next time you were over. Alan," said Muriel coaxingly, "I must keep my promise; you will not make it hard to me. Please go and see her."

Alan, who had thrown himself at Muriel's feet, stretched himself out full length. Then, with a good shake, such as a large St. Bernard sometimes gives himself, he jumped up and stared at Muriel. Her request had not in some way pleased him.

"You wish me to go and see Caroline?" he asked slowly, as if endeavouring to take her words in. "You are anxious that I should call there? Is that what I am to infer from what you said?"

Muriel was surprised at the change in Alan's manner, but she did not allow him to see that she noticed it.

"Caroline wanted you to go badly, and I promised to induce you to give them an hour or so if my inducements can avail anything."

Alan's mood changed. He looked fondly at Muriel. His blue eyes told a tale had she only been skilled enough to read them, but she was not; her glance met his unshrinkingly. Alan took her hand in his.

"I do not require to be told Caroline's wish," he replied, speaking earnestly. "Her likes and dislikes are nothing to me. What do you wish, Murie, my"—And he stopped.

"My sister. Was that what you hesitated about saying, Alan? You need not fear. I objected to it once, but it was long ago, and I had a strange idea that perhaps Norman would not have liked it. Dear, unselfish Nor, as if he would not only have been too pleased. You need never hesitate again, Alan; I shall be pleased to be called your sister—honoured, proud."

Alan made no reply to this speech. Whether he felt any reciprocity on the subject he did not say; for all answer he pressed the hand warmly that lay between his own, and Muriel thought that sufficient.

"My brother Alan," she said, speaking softly. "No one shall ever come between us, shall they, Alan? We must ever be good friends as we have been for years past."

Alan caught his breath. Strong man as he was, it was hard work trying to hide his emotion. He longed to tell her all that she was to him, how the whole world was as nothing compared with her; that he loved her far beyond rubies. And

his heart beat to suffocation, but still he kept it down. He feared to risk all too soon. Not the slightest doubt had he down in the very depths of his heart but that he would eventually win her. No, no, not that; all that tried him was the long time it seemed to take to gain her love. Other girls had only to see to love him, but Muriel, with their long-continued intercourse, close and friendly, always remained the same simple, shy, unsuspicious girl. At times he felt he almost wished that she were different—that she was more worldly, less unsophisticated—but this wish never remained long. Had she been different he had never have loved her. No; it was her purity, unconsciousness, and guilelessness that made her so charming to him. Honest, straightforward, upright himself, Alan meant to choose a wife who would never make him blush, a wife whom he could always love, honour, and cherish, and such an one was Muriel. No, he would not wish her different, for then she would be no wife for him. The difference must be in himself. He must be more patient and kind. He would wait until the time came that her large, expressive eyes drooped when they met his, when the quiet, unassuming manner, always placid—unless when he came upon her suddenly and unexpectedly, as he had done that morning—became confused and constrained, or when her speech grew faltering and broken.

Oh! Alan, Alan, did you not make a mistake then? Might not others, seeing the great value

of the pearl you loved, have stepped in, and with less consideration have gained your prize? But if Alan erred in his manner of behaviour he erred unconsciously, and there was no selfishness in his course of action. No; with great self-denial and pain he shut out for a while all attempts to make her his.

How he longed to take the sweet girl to himself, to his heart! How he wished that he might press her to him for ever! What a shelter his loving arms would make for her so long as their lives should last.

Yes, he felt all that, and repressed it, and how often in after-days he wished that he had but spoken out then.

After a slight pause he answered Muriel—a pause in which, though she guessed it not, he had done fierce battle with himself.

"Friends for aye, Murie; none shall ever come between us, my sister. There would be too much of the auld lang syne business for that."

Unconsciously Muriel nestled closer to him. She felt so safe under his protection, so shielded from all trouble and loneliness. He noticed her action, and a warm thrill ran through him. It was the first time she had ever of her own accord done so significant a thing. Yet she had done it all unconsciously, but her heart, though she knew it not, had spoken there. Muriel did not know her own heart. When she had asked herself only that very morning how she would have answered

Alan had he spoken as Mr. Maitland had done, she was surprised at the glow that warmed her whole being, but still she did not read the signs aright. The scales certainly were dropping off her eyes to a certain extent, both by the proposal she had received from the curate, and also by the conversation she had had with Mrs. Duerdon. She began to see that not only did people marry and be given in marriage, but that she also might at any time be liable to be asked for. Yet she never connected this in any way with Alan. Even had she known that she loved him she would have considered her case as hopeless. He was so high, so noble, so great; he was handsome beyond any she had ever seen; brighter, more sunny than those with whom she had always visited; a king among men, Alan, her friend, her brother. Not the remotest idea had once entered her head that Alan really loved her, loved her with the love that lives for ever. She only supposed that he was good to her for Norman's sake, and also it might be besides because she was solitary, alone. His was the kind heart that must be kind to all, his the gentle sympathy that was bestowed on each who needed it.

Thus Muriel argued to herself, and she was not wrong in her estimate of his character. He was sympathetic, considerate, kind, but he was this and more to her, far, far more; he loved her with all the strength of his heart. Could he content himself, then, with only showing qualities of mind

to her such as he would have shown to the veriest stranger had he known they required them? Surely not; he could no more have contented himself with treating her as he treated others than he could have made himself happy away long from her presence. Before others, it is true, he always comported himself differently to what he did when they were alone. Not that he was untrue. Oh, no! But merely to save her from observation. He did not care that others should tell her of his love before he told it himself. It might have puzzled Muriel to explain in what the different manner of Alan lay. She would, if asked, probably have declared that there was less friendliness before people than when alone, merely because they were too polite to make others feel ill at ease. Perhaps the different looks, the altered tone, the studied manner, had never struck her at all, for she never remarked it aloud.

Early after luncheon Muriel renewed her petition to Alan to go to the Vicarage. Would she have done so had she at all understood the state of affairs? Probably she might. She was a girl who always thought of others before herself.

"You will go, Alan?" she pleaded. "You need not stay so very long. Carrie will be fearfully disappointed if she hears you have spent a whole day here and have not given them a call."

"What business is it of Carrie's whether I call or not? I shall not call on her you may be sure. Indeed I shall try and avoid her if I can.

She is such a nuisance always ; she keeps one paying her compliments."

"Oh, Alan!" reproved Muriel. "She is such a lovely girl there can be no difficulty in saying nice things to her, and it comes so easy to you to say pretty little nothings."

"Thank you, Murie," said Alan, slightly huffed. "At any rate I never pay you any compliments."

Muriel laughed softly. "Because, dear Alan, there is no room. I am not nice-looking, charming, as is Carrie. You take me as I am, and make the best of me, my good friend Alan." Although she tried, Muriel could not bring herself to often say brother.

"There's plenty of room," denied Alan, bluntly, "loads and loads of it, if you would only let me, Murie. But after all, I must confess that I like you all the better for not requiring these pretty little nothings, as you so graphically express yourself. Let me off to-day, I will come over to-morrow and see the lovely Carrie."

"Of course you will do as you like," said Muriel, smiling sweetly, "but if you take my advice you will go at once. Perhaps to-morrow something may happen to prevent your coming. Do not think me officious, interfering, or meddling, but I should like you to go."

"A true *à la* Mrs. Duerdon reply," laughed Alan. "I knew how it would be all along. Strong fellow as I am, you wind me round your little

finger. How do you manage it, Murie? Give me a little of your tact."

Muriel shook her head. How could he ask her to teach him anything? He stood as if deliberating. Muriel looked at him in admiration—unveiled, unblushing admiration, but then there was no one to see. They were alone, and Alan's eyes were on his boots, so that he could not well guess how she was looking. How the next few months' happiness would have been ensured could he but have looked up and seen her gaze. When he next spoke she glanced away.

"I suppose you remember the copy-book text," he said, "and one I daresay that you teach the children in the school, 'Never put off until to-morrow the things that can be done to-day.'"

"Yes," she laughed, "and 'Procrastination is the thief of time,' and ever so many more texts. You see, Alan, even the copy-books are on my side."

"Will you come with me, Muriel? the walk together would be very pleasant. You could help me out, famously."

His blue eyes glanced beseechingly at her, mirth and merriment in their depths in spite of their pleading.

Muriel knew Carrie did not want her, or else she would have said, "Bring Alan, or come with him some day." She had not put it that way, her petition had been, "Send him," and Muriel complied to the letter of the request.

"No, Alan, you must go alone, I have some writing to do, I will try and get it cleared whilst you are away. Writing is the bane of my existence."

Alan laughed good-humouredly. "I see you are full of excuses, I will accept them one and all, and go alone. At the same time there is no necessity for you to write, I will do it for you on my return, that is if it is business and not moonshine."

"What is moonshine, Alan?"

"Unnecessary nonsense, such as girls at school send to each other. If you are writing to an old school friend I beg to decline the post."

"I have no friend but you, Alan; that is I have no friend to write to," corrected she, remembering Carrie and Ernest Mervin, also Mr. Maitland.

"You forget my mother, Murie."

"Not so, but I do not correspond with her. You take all my messages. Besides, Alan, you are forgetting what Mrs. Duerdon conceded at lunch."

"No, young lady, I am not. Excuse me, I shall not forget it either. She is going to spare you for a week to visit my mother. It is a good thing her new maid proves such a treasure; Major's nose will be quite put out."

"Major will never mind, she is married and quite independent."

"Is that one of the results of getting married?" asked Alan, his saucy blue eyes resting on Muriel's changing countenance.

"It's one of the results in her case," laughed Muriel, "for she is comfortably off, and has no longer any need to work for her living."

"Um! Muriel come out and find me a rose. A beauty, one that will suit my complexion."

"Alan, you have no complexion. Gentlemen do not need any."

"Don't they? that is news to me. I am fearfully ignorant. Instruct me, Muriel. What have we to consider—my hair? What colour will suit it?"

Muriel glanced at his head, not that there was any need. She knew the nut-brown colour off by heart well enough. The curls, the pretty waving hair. "Anything will suit it," she said, thoughtfully, "that is, I mean any colour."

"Yes, I'm a handsome fellow, am I not, Marie?" replied Alan, in no way discomposed. "Truthfully now, do you think anything would improve me?"

To have been candid Muriel must have answered no. But she did not like him to be vain, so she said quietly—

"Yes, Alan, of course some things would. No one is perfect."

"Oh, are they not?" dissented Alan, meaningly. "I know some one who is perfect."

"Do you really?" asked Muriel, questioningly. "They must be very, very good then."

"They are, of course, good. Perfection, I presume, means the height of goodness, even if not more."

"You were not alluding to Norman, were you?" inquired Muriel, in a low tone.

"No; I was not thinking of him just then. It was another friend of mine."

Muriel said no more. She concluded he meant some male friend whom she did not know. Not the slightest suspicion had she that he alluded to herself. She was far too free from vanity for such an idea to strike her.

"About this rose, Muriel, let us go out and get it. I may as well get my visit to the Vicarage over."

Mrs. Duerdon met them as they were crossing the hall. For a wonder she had been out walking in the garden with the help of Mr. Duerdon's arm. He was not far behind. Mrs. Duerdon was in one of her most gracious moods.

"You are not thinking of returning home to-night, Alan," she observed, pleasantly. "The north room, as you are aware, is always at your disposal."

Alan was pleased; his whole face shone.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Duerdon; I will avail myself of your kind hospitality. I can stop at the post-office and wire to my mother."

Mrs. Duerdon nodded her head acquiescingly, and then walked towards the library. Alan hastened back to open the door for her. She valued greatly these little civilities, and Alan, always courteous in manner, was careful to attend to them. On returning to the hall door he met Mr.

Duerdon on the mat outside wiping his boots with the utmost care. Not that they were in the least degree dirty; it was only a habit which he observed all the year round, in summer equally as much as in winter.

"Not leaving us, Alan, I trust," he remarked, politely, continuing his occupation.

"Not just at present," replied Alan. "I am afraid I presume on your hospitality, and that you will get tired of me."

"Alan is going to stay until to-morrow," said Muriel, joining them. "He is staying at Aunt Clara's solicitations. Just now he is going to the Vicarage."

Mr. Duerdon gave over wiping his boots, and stepped inside. The door was open, and he stood looking out.

"Going to see Mr. Mervin—poor fellow! he is sadly broken down—or going to see the fair Caroline, eh, Alan?"

Alan felt annoyed at the imputation. The colour mounted to his cheeks in spite of his utmost endeavours to look at his ease. He glanced slyly at Muriel, and to add to his discomfiture, she was regarding him calmly. As Alan made no attempt to speak, she undertook to do so for him—

"Yes, he is going to see Caroline."

Why this speech should have annoyed Alan no one knew, but that he was not pleased could be detected both in voice and manner. He was quite put out.

"I was going—simply to please you. I shall not go there now to please—myself."

"You have to go to the post, Alan."

"I have. That is my business."

"Should I accompany you? I have an errand in the village."

"You can do as you like, and I shall decide you have pleased *yourself*."

The colour rose quickly into Muriel's sensitive face. She turned to Mr. Duerdon, who had been an amused spectator of the little scene.

"Have you anything for me to do?" she inquired, the tears in her eyes.

"Plenty, my dear, plenty. Have you arranged those papers I asked you to do?"

"Oh dear, no; I quite forgot them. Strange, but they quite slipped my memory. I will return with you now."

Muriel gave one wistful look towards Alan, and then laid her hand on his arm. Alan caught it immediately.

"You will not be very long away, Alan?" she said, speaking very gently.

"I shall not be away at all," he answered, "unless you come with me."

Mr. Duerdon walked off smiling to himself.

"It will all come right; it will all end well. I can read the symptoms. But I am better out of the way; lovers' quarrels need no witnesses."

"Alan, you just said you did not want me," said Muriel, half laughing.

"I never did. You asked me if you should accompany me, and I replied, 'Do as you like,' which I thought was equivalent to saying 'Come.' I thought you would like to join me."

"You expected me to be very forward, then," retorted Muriel, with more temper than was usual for her to display. "I shall not come with you; you can get Caroline for your companion."

"I did not need your permission for that," said Alan, sharply. "Caroline is worth ten of you. She will not decline to accompany me."

"I never declined," replied Muriel, trying to keep back her tears. "You never asked me."

"No, and I never shall. You are so dreadfully afraid of being considered forward that you are more like an automaton or a statue without a heart."

"Oh, Alan," pleaded Muriel, reproachfully, "I am not the least bit like that. I—I"—

"You need not try and humbug me," retorted Alan, trying to speak stoically, and keeping his face determinedly turned from Muriel's. "I want you to go with me into the village, and you do not wish to come, and there is an end of it."

Muriel stood twisting her thumbs. She was too proud to give in, though anxious to join him. She waited for him to ask her definitely, but he did not mean to concede any more.

"Well, I will be off," he declared, moving slowly away.

He half hoped to feel her hand again on his arm, but it did not come. Muriel stood still.

"Give my souvenirs to the fair Caroline," called out she, seeing that Alan was moving away in reality.

"What souvenirs? I have none."

"Kisses or love."

Alan turned back then and faced Muriel.

"How can I give what I have not got?" he asked, inquiringly.

"What do you mean?" she said, undaunted.

"I mean what I say. How can I give Caroline either kisses or love from you when you give me neither of them? Must I coin them?"

The crimson flush that dyed Muriel's face was painful to see.

"You can—take my—my love," she said, slowly; "surely any—one can carry that."

"Um, yes, if you can spare any for me to carry."

"Alan do not be so stupid."

"I beg your pardon, Muriel, but I am not stupid."

Muriel looked down. She did not like Alan's present mood.

"And how about the kisses, Murie? must I give them to Caroline, place them there on her cheek?"

Muriel turned away. It really was too bad of him to ask such questions.

"Well, Murie," he continued, laughingly, "do you commission me to kiss Caroline? Am I to do it at your request?"

Muriel turned back again, her little head drawn up in dignity.

"I will give you the same answer, Alan, that you gave me a few minutes ago, 'Do as you like, and I shall decide that you have pleased yourself.'"

It was Alan's turn to look dignified.

"I see that you do not care much about it," he said, in a very injured tone. "If you were anybody else but Muriel Vivian, you could not resist the temptation of accompanying me into the village."

"Perhaps not; but then, you see, *I am* unfortunately the girl called Muriel Vivian. Au revoir, Alan; take my advice and go and see Caroline. She will be disappointed if you do not go."

Alan muttered something unintelligible, and strode away, evidently in indignation.

CHAPTER IV.

When Alan had telegraphed to his mother, he turned about on his heels in indecision. Should he go and see Caroline, or should he return at once to Muriel. His heart inclined to go back immediately, but then would he not be showing a great lack of spirit. Which should he do? Rarely was it that impulsive Alan was in a dilemma as to which course he should pursue. He revolved the pros and cons with a minuteness most unusual to him. To go and see Caroline, or not to go, that was the question. Inclination veered one way, duty another. Caroline had been his mother's guest, was a friend of the family. She had always made herself agreeable to him. Then she had begged Muriel to send him. Should he go? No; he would not. At that juncture he turned and faced homewards. Then he stopped. Would Muriel be pleased if he did not go? Perhaps not. And he must certainly call some time. What time like the present? None. So he turned again deliberately, and made at a tremendous speed towards the Vicarage. At the rate of ten miles an hour went he. The quiet villagers stared after him in open-mouthed wonder. They were slow, unexcitable people themselves, and it amazed them to see such life and activity.

"He's happen late for 's supper," remarked one man, taking his pipe out of his mouth, and knocking it on a wall near him. "It might be summat good as makes him walk i' that road."

"Supper," answered a young fellow, who was acquainted with the ways of the aristocracy, and prided himself on his knowledge. "Supper, Stevenson! bless your heart, man, why he's not had his dinner yet. They dines late those gents."

"Poor souls," retorted the first speaker, compassionately, "he may well walk at that rate. I'd walk fast if I'd a empty stommick. He happens smells dinner a long way off."

The young fellow laughed contemptuously. He could not undertake to explain away such ignorance. Meanwhile Alan strode on, in through the Vicarage gate, which swung backwards and forwards with its click, click, click as he rounded the drive.

No one was in the garden, and, if they had been, it is probable that Alan would not have seen them unless they had gone straight before him.

"Mr. Mervin and Miss Danvers at home?" he inquired of the maid, who answered the door, half hoping, doubtless, to receive a reply in the negative. But, if so, he was doomed to disappointment.

"Master's in the study, sir; Miss Caroline is upstairs."

"Show me into the study, then," was the abrupt command.

But Caroline, who had been summoned to the top of the stairs by the uncommon sound of the front door bell, recognised Alan's voice at once. It was but the work of an instant to fly down speedily.

"At last," she said, going forward to meet Alan with both hands outstretched.

Alan looked surprised at the eager welcome. There was an undefinable reproof in the quiet way he took only one of the proffered hands.

"Your grandfather," he said; "can I see him?"

Caroline pouted.

"Grandpa," she said; "I thought you had come to see me."

"Certainly, I have come to see you both."

"That is no compliment," she declared, her lovely face looking up winningly at him. "You cannot disturb grandpa, either; he is sure to be asleep. You will have to wait tea. Will you come into the dining-room?"

Alan followed her lead. He did not intend to stop, but neither did he intend telling her so in the first moment of their meeting.

"How is Muriel?" inquired Caroline, after they had been talking some time.

"She seems very well," answered Alan, indifferently.

Caroline laughed.

"You are like me, Alan," she remarked. "You do not take much interest in Muriel."

Alan's blue eyes opened wide in amazement.

Caroline's fair face flushed a pretty pink all over.

"I mean—I mean," she stammered, in confusion, "that she—that you"—

"Do not trouble to explain," interrupted Alan, carelessly, "I know what you would wish to say."

"Then I was not wrong," pursued Caroline, with ill-timed curiosity.

The subject was badly chosen, but if Miss Danvers hoped to get Alan to say something against Muriel, she was destined to be sadly disappointed. He was silent.

"How does she manage to amuse herself all day long?" went on Caroline.

"She—of whom do you speak?" asked Alan, haughtily.

"Muriel, of course, she seems so slow and stupid, I think her existence must be a dead-alive one"—

"What sort of existence is that, may I inquire?"

Caroline fidgeted.

"As if you do not know," she replied, petulantly. "Alan, what makes you so strange, you are not at all like yourself?"

"Am I not?" he retorted, laughingly. "Who am I like?"

"Anybody disagreeable and nasty, not a bit like nice handsome Alan Murray."

"Let me see," pondered Alan, "was that a complimentary speech or not? Ought I to make

a bow? No, I scarcely think so. You were more polite in the olden times, Carrie."

"Yes, and you were nicer, Alan."

"Well then, I had better go home and improve."

"No, no," was the quick reply, "you will have to spend the evening here."

Alan took out his watch and Carrie stole a look at the handsome face, at the crisp curly chestnut hair. How her heart went out to him, and again her mind was filled with misgivings of Muriel.

"Did you hear of the croquet party at the Daintrees', Alan?" inquired she, rising and closing a window.

"Carrie you should have let me do that," observed Alan, not getting up however. "What party? I have heard nothing of it."

"Muriel was there," replied Caroline.

"And you?"

"Certainly."

"Suppose you tell me about it then?"

Caroline drew her chair near Alan.

"Well," he remarked, "I am all impatience, what have you to tell me? Was Miss Caroline Danvers very much admired as usual?"

A quick triumphant look covered Caroline's face.

"I can tell you who was not admired," she said.

"Let us talk of those who were," answered Alan, politely, "it is always best to look at the prettiest side of the picture."

"I do not know that any one looked particularly well."

"Except yourself."

"Well, yes, except myself; I know several people remarked how well I—how—do not laugh, Alan—pretty I was."

"Lucky Caroline to have so many admirers."

"Nobody admired Muriel."

"Poor Muriel, did she feel the defection greatly?"

"I do not know that she did, indeed I am sure she did not mind," answered Caroline, impatiently. "But then you see it would be no use, she is so plain."

"Plain is she?" inquired Alan, as if the idea were quite new to him.

"Hopelessly plain, have you never heard what Mrs. Duerdon says about her?"

"I may have done, but really my memory is most imperfect on these points."

"Alan, do you not care for beauty?"

"Decidedly, 'a thing of beauty is a joy for ever,' or something to that effect, is it not?"

And Alan made a deep bow, Caroline was appeased.

"I am so glad that you acknowledge the merit of beauty," continued she, in a tone of satisfaction. "Poor Muriel, it is sad for her."

"Sad, in what way?"

"Really, Alan, how dense you are all at once. Sad for her that every one thinks her so plain."

"Does every one think so?"

"Of course they do. I told you so before, and you said 'Poor Muriel.'"

"Was not that the correct thing to say?"

"Yes, if you meant it, but you seem to be talking satirically. Alan, I cannot understand you."

"Did you tell Muriel what everyone said of her?"

"I did; I thought it was my duty. She was so *gauche*, so plainly dressed, and seemed so unconscious of her defects, that I thought it was only kind."

Alan's lip curled, but he tried to repress it.

"Was Muriel grateful for the interest you displayed in her welfare?"

"I do not think she minded. She laughed and said no one would trouble about her whilst I was by."

Alan's eye brightened, it was an answer so thoroughly characteristic of Muriel, his darling.

"But I told her that people were remarking, that she should try and look her best, and that"—

"And she laughed more than ever," interrupted Alan, "now did she not?"

"You are right. She was so merry that she vexed me. I said, 'Muriel, you do not mind one bit, you should try and look your best. Remember that you are plain, and should make the most of yourself.'"

"What answer did she make?"

"Oh, something about she forgot her looks always in admiring other people, but that she would try and look better another time. Very provoking of her, was it not?"

"I thought that was what you meant her to do."

Caroline simpered.

"I wanted her to feel her position properly. She has no right to give herself airs, as if she were pretty."

"I can scarcely imagine Muriel giving herself airs, she always seems too retiring if anything."

"Oh, you do not know Muriel's disposition," retorted Caroline, angrily. "She is so deceitful."

"Now Carrie tell me," said Alan, coaxingly, "who was the every body who spoke against Muriel's appearance?"

"I cannot remember, but every one who was there."

"Well, tell me some of their names, I should like to know who are people of good and bad taste."

"The Dawsons, the Makins—the Johnsons—the"—

"Did they say Muriel looked *gauche* or plain?" interrupted Alan, in surprise.

"No—o—not any of them," owned Caroline, crestfallen.

"Who else then, Carrie?"

There was a pause.

"Do not bother me, Alan, I cannot remember now, it is some weeks ago."

But Alan was not going to let her off so easily.

"You remember some part that would be better forgotten," he said, sternly. "Stretch your memory, and recollect a little more."

Caroline's eyes fell beneath the steady gaze that was fixed on her, but she saw no hope of escape.

"Well," she said, at last, "I do not remember anybody saying anything about Muriel only Edith Williams, she said 'Did you ever see such a guy as Muriel Vivian.'"

"Then after all you made Muriel uncomfortable merely at the remark of a jealous ill-bred school girl."

Caroline nodded her head independently. She had been taken to task, but she was not going to own it. Alan got up and walked to the mantelpiece. Perfect good temper on his face, though Caroline had annoyed him.

"Do you think Mr. Mervin would care to see me now?" he asked.

"You can see him at tea time, Alan. I daresay it is ready now. Shall I go and see?"

"Not on my account, I cannot stay, Carrie. I have promised to dine at the Duerdons'."

"And stay all night?" asked Caroline, jealously.

"Yes, and stay all night."

"You are always visiting them, Alan, you might divide your favours more equally."

"By favours do you mean myself?"

"Well, I do," replied Caroline, blushing. "Muriel is always seeing you."

"Let us trust then that my presence will in a short degree atone for other people's want of admiration. Muriel, you know, is a great friend of mine."

Caroline tossed her head contemptuously.

"Of course every one knows that."

"Then do you not think," and Alan turned his merry glance full on Caroline, "that it was a bit —the least wee bit unkind to speak against one friend to another?"

"You could have stood up for her, Alan."

"So I could," he replied, as if a new idea had just struck him. "Truly, as you wisely remark, I might have defended her."

"Do you not consider Muriel very plain, Alan?"

"I must first ask her permission to discuss her looks, before I venture to give an opinion," was the cautious reply.

"Then you agree with me?" retorted Caroline, triumphantly, "and you do not care to own it."

"You must give me time to think the point well over. I daresay I shall be able to tell you positively next time we meet."

"As if you do not know already. I verily believe you think Muriel beautiful. Nobody else does."

"Carrie, were you at the Mortimers' party last week?"

"Yes, you know I was."

"Well, you remember Captain Davenport?"

"I could scarcely forget him, Alan. He paid me great attention."

"*Sans doute.* Well, who do you suppose he considered the nicest-looking girl there?"

"Fie, Alan! as if I should like to say."

"You may venture with all safety."

Caroline cast her most bewitching look on Alan, and with one finger pointed to herself.

He shook his head dissentingly. "Wrong this time."

"He never—thought—Muriel—was?"

"He did though; and Captain Davenport is an acknowledged judge of beauty."

"I cannot tell where his eyes were," retorted Caroline. "There were many prettier there."

"Doubtless; but that was his verdict."

"He is like Ernest, then—Ernest always thinks Muriel is the most attractive girl that there is to be seen anywhere. I always think that will be a case," said Caroline, maliciously.

"What! your uncle—and—and Muriel?"

"Yes, if you like to call him so."

"I beg your pardon," said Alan, biting his under-lip in vexation. "I always thought he was your uncle."

"So he is, but we are so near of an age that I never presume on the relationship."

"Well, Carrie," exclaimed Alan, hastily, "I must be off; it strikes me that if I had brought Muriel we should have been short of conversation. We have talked of nothing else but of her."

"I thought no topic would interest you better," replied Caroline, saucily; "but if you will come again soon I will entertain you better. Give my love to Muriel."

"I will do so, and in return remember me to

your grandfather. Say I hope to see him next time."

Caroline pouted, and when Alan had gone she went and stood before a mirror admiring herself. A lovely face was reflected there.

"How can he withstand its power?" remarked she, aloud. "Half the people in this neighbourhood are ringing its praises."

A knock came to the door. Caroline turned quickly, not that she was ashamed to be found casting looks of admiration at herself, but because she hoped that Alan had repented and come back.

It was not Alan but a maid.

"It is only you, is it?" exclaimed Caroline, in vexation.

"Tea is served, and your grandpapa is waiting in the breakfast-room, Miss Caroline."

"Let him wait then," was the undutiful rejoinder. "I generally have to wait for him. *Nous changeons cela.* Who let Mr. Murray in?"

"I did, miss."

"Then next time remember that he comes to see me and not grandpapa. You would have shown him in the study."

"At his own request, Miss Caroline."

"Certainly; but grandpapa gets too old to be disturbed. I am here to save him all trouble. For the future let me be the judge of whom he is to be bothered with."

"Very well, miss." But the maid was not too dense to understand such manœuvring. She told

her fellow-servants that Miss Caroline was "a trying that hard for to ketch Mr. Murray, as nobody but herself had no knowledge on." After which mystifying speech there was a general roar of laughter at Caroline's expense. Could Alan have heard it it might have done his heart good. Truth to confess Caroline had made Alan feel uncomfortable concerning Ernest Mervin and his *penchant* for Muriel. The only person of whom Alan was jealous or inclined to be jealous was Ernest, simply because Ernest and Norman had been good friends. The same tie that drew Muriel and Alan together might safely be dreaded as the one that would draw Ernest and Muriel to each other, and Alan knew it. No one in the world save Ernest Mervin did Alan fear. He determined to sound Muriel as to her liking for Ernest. But when he got back to Astley Park and Muriel greeted him with her rare smile, all fears and thoughts of every one save she in her gracious girlhood left him. He thought how charming and winning she was, and wondered however he had summoned up determination enough to leave her whilst he went to the Vicarage alone. Thoughts of what Caroline, in her spiteful jealousy had said to wound the sensitive spirit, came to him, and he resolved to find how deep the wound lay, and to do his best to heal the sore.

"Murie, you never told me you were at the Daintrees' party a few weeks ago. Was it a nice party?"

"Oh, very nice, Alan." And there was no shade on the face, nothing to denote anger or grief.

"Who looked the nicest there?"

Muriel laughed. "I scarcely know, so many were beautifully dressed, and pretty; but I almost think Caroline did."

"How did you look, Murie?"

"Me—or rather I should say I—oh, much the same as usual, only so—so—nothing remarkable."

"I believe you looked beautiful," spoke up Alan, staunchly. "Were you in white?"

"Yes, white merino trimmed with blue velvet. But, Alan, you must not try and flatter yourself that I was nearly as nice as you would wish me to be. I looked ordinary and commonplace."

"I do not believe it; you must seem a lady any and everywhere."

Such a sweet smile illumined Muriel's face. "Thank you, Alan," she said, gently. "How nice of you always to think so well of me. Yes, I hope I looked a lady."

"What did Caroline say to you, Murie?"

"Say—in what way?"

"What did she remark about your appearance?"

A look of intelligence crossed Muriel's expressive face, and again she smiled.

"You know, Alan, I believe you do. Caroline said I was dressed quite in an *outré* style. She was quite vexed with me."

"I wonder you allow Caroline to dictate to you,

for you are generally far better dressed than she is."

"She means it kindly, Alan. I just listen to what she says and then forget it. Is not that the best way?"

"It might be the best method with some people, but not with Caroline; she is too inordinately vain. A little reproof would be wiser."

"She has every excuse for being vain," replied Muriel, in extenuation of Caroline's fault.

"*If* anything can be found sufficient excuse," was Alan's guarded reply. "But that is a question Murie, which wiser heads than mine must decide."

Mrs. Duerdon joined them, and the conversation became general. After dinner Alan asked Muriel to sing, and she sang in her full, clear tones, which rang out, entrancing her listener, that beautiful song of Claribel's, "I cannot sing the old songs."

I cannot sing the old songs
I sang long years ago,
For heart and voice would fail me,
And foolish tears would flow,
For bygone hours come o'er my heart
With each familiar strain,
I cannot sing the old songs
Or dream those dreams again.

I cannot sing the old songs,
Their charm is sad and deep,
Their melodies would waken
Old sorrows from their sleep;
And though all unforgotten still,
And sadly sweet they be,
I cannot sing the old songs,
They are too dear to me.

I cannot sing the old songs,
For visions come again
Of golden dreams departed,
And years of weary pain;
Perhaps when earthly fetters shall
Have set my spirit free,
My voice may know the old songs
For all eternity.

Muriel was very much moved by every line in the song, but when it came to the last verse she nearly broke down. With great effort she controlled herself. Her undemonstrative character and habits of repression served her well then. Alan got up and led her from the piano. He understood her feelings, and his unspoken sympathy was expressed by the warm hand clasp he gave, also by his refraining from petitioning for another song, for he loved to hear Muriel sing, as indeed did every one who once heard her. Mr. Duerdon always rejoiced that her talent had been so greatly cultivated. Mrs. Duerdon, waking from a nap, professed to be surprised that the music had ceased. Without any ado Muriel returned to the piano and played piece after piece. She was quite a proficient, but her powers of brilliancy and execution never struck the listener in the same way that her powers of playing with expression did. Literally the instrument seemed to speak under her touch. In the middle of "Thème Allemand" by Leybach, an interruption came. The door burst open, and Cartwright, Mrs. Duerdon's new maid, came flying in *sans ceremonie*. Such an

event had never occurred before in Mr. Duerdon's well-ordered household.

"They are gone, all gone!" exclaimed the maid, in great excitement. And verily her appearance would have warranted the belief that she was gone so wild and *distrait* did she look, her arms flying, her hair blown about in every direction, her eyes almost starting out of their sockets in fright. The confusion she created was great. Mr. Duerdon seemed the most composed, for though Alan had a smile on his face, he looked anxiously at Mrs. Duerdon. He never knew what line of conduct she might pursue.

"What has gone?" asked Mr. Duerdon. "All the servants?"

"Or the silver?" interpolated Muriel, who was bending over Mrs. Duerdon. That lady was gasping in dismay.

"What shall I do? Oh! what shall I do?" demanded Cartwright, wringing her hands.

"Collect your senses and explain, instead of frightening your mistress into fits," reproved Alan sternly.

Thus adjured Cartwright turned herself towards Alan and addressed herself to him.

"I left them upstairs, sir, all ready to go into"—

"Left what?" interrupted Mr. Duerdon anxiously. "We cannot understand what you mean by them."

"My mistress's jewellery."

At that announcement Mrs. Duerdon gave a shrill scream.

"My jewels, my valuable jewels!"

Mr. Duerdon gave a sigh of relief. Bad as it was, he was glad it was not worse.

"We will go upstairs and look about," he said at once. "How long have you missed them Cartwright?"

"Not many minutes, sir. I was tidying and putting things to rights a bit when one of the maids called me downstairs to see something wonderful."

"And you left them?"

"I did, sir," and again Cartwright wrung her hands. "I did, but most unwillingly. I said to Maria, 'Wait a minute whilst I locks these up,' and she laughs at me. 'Fancy thieves at Astley Park,' says she. 'Oh, my, what a joke!' And with that, sir, I felt ashamed of myself, and ran off with her, and when I got back the thieves had been and taken them."

"Let the bells be rung and all the men summoned," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon excitedly. "We will catch the rogues yet, daring to come to my house. Alan, will you undertake to see that the police are set on the alert?"

"With pleasure, after a search upstairs. But excuse me first. A few questions to Cartwright. What was it that you were fetched downstairs for?"

"That is the worst of it, sir," declared the maid, beginning to cry. "There was nothing

when I got into the servants' hall. Most of the servants were there, and they said, 'You are too late. What a time you have been!'"

"And you could not find out what you were wanted for?"

"No, sir."

Alan shook his head knowingly.

"Do hurry upstairs," begged Mrs. Duerdon "You are wasting valuable time. Talk afterwards. No one ever was so unfortunate as I am. We never hear of other people losing their jewels."

"They will be found again," promised Alan reassuringly.

"How can you tell?" bewailed Mrs. Duerdon irritably.

Alan stooped and whispered something in Mr. Duerdon's ear which made him start.

"Not likely!" he said in amazement.

Muriel looked inquiringly, but Alan said—

"We will go and investigate, and then we will return and report our success."

"Had we not better question Muriel?" asked Mr. Duerdon.

"Mrs. Duerdon, can you spare Muriel for a few minutes?" pleaded Alan. "It will, I believe, expedite our movements. Cartwright can stay with you."

"Cartwright is such a simpleton," declared Mrs. Duerdon.

"Therefore of less use to us in our discoveries," whispered Alan in her ear.

"Take Muriel then, but mind you do not keep me in suspense any longer than you can help. This excitement will kill me."

Unwillingly as the request had been acceded, they were obliged to avail themselves of it, and left the room.

"Lead the way, Muriel," said Mr. Duerdon. "We will go to your aunt's dressing-room before we stay to talk."

Muriel ran off lightly; the other two followed. Muriel, however, had scarcely entered the room before a loud shout reached them. Alan tore after her, expecting at least to find thieves in the room instead of which Muriel was exclaiming loudly—

"They are here! They are here!"

And she was holding lockets and chains up to view triumphantly.

At that moment Mr. Duerdon entered the room panting. He was not very strong, and excitement soon upset him.

"Have you captured any one, or have they escaped?" asked he in bewilderment. "Who shouted?"

"I did," answered Muriel. "There are no thieves, Mr. Duerdon, for look, the jewellery seems to be all here. I do not miss any of it so far, but Cartwright had better be summoned; she will know. There must have been some mistake. Should I run and tell her?"

Mr. Duerdon nodded his head, then turned and faced Alan. His look was significant.

"Let us hurry away into the library or somewhere," exclaimed he hastily. "There will be a hubbub and confusion presently. You were correct in your surmise, Alan. How ever was it that you obtained the clue?"

"By putting this and that together. One day Muriel told me that she was afraid that Cartwright led a weary life. The poor thing is over-anxious to please, and the other servants play jokes upon her. Directly she mentioned having been fetched downstairs on some plausible excuse and finding it a false alarm, I felt sure she had been hoaxed again."

"But such abominable behaviour must not go unpunished," declared Mr. Duerdon in righteous indignation. "Must my wife and friends be upset by a parcel of servants? Why, instead of being the most orderly house we shall become the most disorderly one in the neighbourhood."

"True, true," smiled Alan, "but I think this once I would let it pass. They will all be in fright enough as it is. You may depend upon it they never meant the joke to go so far. Cartwright's unexpected move will have floored them all. Poor Cartwright!"

"You may well say 'Poor Cartwright!'" laughed Mr. Duerdon aloud. "You would indeed pity her if you could see her now under my wife's inquisition. The poor creature will heartily wish she had never been born. But, Murray, the servants' behaviour has been intolerable; I never thought they

did things like that. Upon my word I have always looked upon them as machines."

"But they are flesh and blood, and with feelings like ourselves," replied Alan, who, being a younger man, could remember better the jokes that they practised on each other, which he as a privileged little boy was allowed to witness.

It turned out on investigation that Alan Murray was quite right in his supposition. All the servants had been a long time at Astley Park, and they resented a fresh face amongst themselves. Cartwright proved ready game. She was so anxious to oblige, so fearful, and at the same time most unsuspicious, so that they played all manner of tricks on her. But they had gone too far in the matter of the jewellery. She verily believed it had all been stolen, and that she herself would be responsible. Without waiting to tell any of her companions the disaster, as they expected she would do, without pausing for deliberation, she in the first flush of her terror and dismay rushed downstairs to headquarters.

Mr. Duerdon never told his wife the state of the case; he quite feared she would cause all the domestics to be sent away. This he did not desire, as he liked old faces. So Mrs. Duerdon and Cartwright mystified each other greatly over the proceedings, Cartwright persisting that the jewellery had gone, Mrs. Duerdon being as positive that it had never been touched, or else why was it back again?

"You must have been blind for the time, Cartwright," declared her mistress with provoking pertinacity. "The jewellery was here, and Miss Muriel found it the moment she came up."

"It never were here," Cartwright would answer. "I felt about as well as looked, and it was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps the thief were in hiding close by, and replaced it when I ran downstairs."

Which suggestion was a real matter of fact, for the servant who had taken them was standing behind the door in the next room ready to pounce on Cartwright when she called out. But Cartwright failed to fulfil the rôle of the programme, and instead of giving a shriek of dismay rushed down to startle the drawing-room occupants. The pretended thief peeped out cautiously, thinking Cartwright was long in giving the alarm. Finding she had gone, and guessing somewhat of the situation, the girl hurriedly put back everything as she had taken it, and rushed downstairs pell-mell to terrify the other servants.

"We shall catch it now," declared she in real fright. "Cartwright has gone to tell."

"Keep a silent tongue, you terrified silly!" commanded one of the servants. "Cartwright knows no more than the missus who has taken it. They'll never guess. You have put everything back?"

"Every blessed mortial."

"Well, let them stay. You are all right."

And nothing further was ever said on the subject.

But the servants took care not to repeat any more pranks, thankful that they had escaped that time.

Mr. Duerdon feared for some time that he had done wrong in loosing the reins of authority, and for several weeks daily expected some fresh outbreak. But nothing came. Outwardly the servants remained the same staid, respectful retainers, and no more fracas occurred to upset the even tenor of Cartwright's life. Alan of course told Muriel the ins and outs of the case, but it was nothing that was new to her. Muriel had had her misgivings as soon as she found the jewellery. Thieves she knew were not in the habit of taking things merely for the fun of returning them. One thing she was glad of was that Alan was there that evening.

"I did nothing worthy of congratulation," he remarked once when she mentioned this.

"Perhaps not in point of valour, for none was needed, but you acted with great tact and discretion, Alan, so far as Mrs. Duerdon was concerned. She would have undoubtedly have dismissed the whole household only for your wisdom."

And with such praise from Muriel Alan was proud.

CHAPTER V.

One fair morning in September, Alan was preparing to start for Astley. Mrs. Murray had been busy reading a letter from her daughter Barbara, married, and living in Ceylon; but she laid the precious document down to watch Alan.

"Not ready yet," she said, with her pleasant smile: "you are very particular this morning, Alan."

Alan shrugged his shoulders—his strong, broad shoulders—and his mother looked at him with pride.

"Going to see Muriel?" she asked.

"I am going to Astley Park, mother."

"Is not that an equivocation, my son?"

Alan's ruddy face went a deeper glow, but he made no answer.

"For whom are those flowers?" pursued his mother mischievously; "they are both choice and beautiful."

"They are for Norman's grave. I take some every week; and if anything prevents me taking them, I send them over by a gardener."

"And, Alan, you honestly consider that you do all that for Norman's sake? Do you not think you have a deeper motive?"

Alan's blue eyes fell under his mother's gaze.

"I was very fond of Norman," he said, "very fond."

"I am sure you were, my son; but you are fonder of some one now—some one whom it pleases to place flowers on Norman's grave. Tell me, am I not right?"

"Muriel did not wish me to rob the hothouses," replied Alan, somewhat sulky under his catechising.

"Of course, she could not help feeling what an honour you were conferring on her," said Mrs. Murray lightly.

"I do not think she regarded the matter as an honour. She only seemed afraid of robbing us."

"She could get as many as she wanted out of her own hothouses, I suppose?"

"Mrs. Duerdon will not have them cut, mother, unless such as are worthless. Those, of course, Muriel would not have for Norman; so I promised her the choicest we have. You do not grudge them, mother?"

"Certainly not; I am pleased *for her* to have them."

Alan laid his choice bouquet down on the table carefully.

"Mother, you do not forget Norman Vivian, do you? A fine, intellectual boy, with a handsome face."

"No, Alan, I remember him well; I was quite taken with his appearance and manners."

"And you thought very well of Muriel once?"

"I think well of her still, my boy. She has none of Norman's great gifts, either of face or intellect, I should say; but she has his smile at times, and is a refined, sensitive girl."

"And her singing, mother; it is divine."

"She has a sweet, full voice, well cultivated."

"And she is a first-rate musician."

"True Alan, but so are lots of girls; in fact, every one plays in these days."

"She is an accomplished gentlewoman, mother."

"I do not wish to deny that, Alan: but she is not fit to mate with my bonny boy."

"She is fit for the first match in the land," retorted Alan quickly. "The sweetest girl I have ever seen."

Mrs. Murray smiled slightly, but did not speak.

"Muriel reminds me," continued Alan, "of a pearl—pure, choice, valuable—of a beautiful picture painted in quiet colours. All that is refined and gentle and cultivated I connect with her."

"A pearl in a poor setting—a grand picture in a common frame then, Alan."

"I do not see that," replied Alan, flushing hotly; "I think Muriel very good-looking."

"Slightly tame, is she not? I always fancy so."

"You are mistaken in her, mother; no one is fuller of fun than is Muriel at times. Her education and trouble may have made her quiet and just whilst you are thinking so she turns on you, and

startles you by flashes of merriment. And her spirit! Why," declared Alan with animation, "she has more than any one I know; high and undaunted; nothing can crush it, and the right sort, too. No, mother, there is no girl anywhere like Muriel."

"Yet you are going to Astley, ostensibly to Norman's grave. Why not own you are going to see Muriel?"

"Come, mother, do not laugh at me."

"I would not for worlds, Alan; but I want you to see yourself as I see you—determinedly bent on winning Muriel."

There was silence for a moment, then Alan answered in a husky voice,

"You are right: I am set on gaining Muriel if I can. But, mother, I am not sure that I can win her; she is so dainty, so un-get-at-able."

Mrs. Murray smiled. She could not fancy any one not being proud to be united to Alan.

"You see," continued Alan, speaking thoughtfully, "all Muriel's love was for Norman, and seems buried with him in his grave."

"But he is in heaven, dear boy. You cannot think that she will cut herself off from all earthly love."

"Sometimes, mother, I get jealous of other people, but, I must confess, without any cause—only the misgivings of my own heart. She is, I believe, as much attached to me as she is to any one."

"And more, if I know anything of the human heart," replied Mrs. Murray significantly. "Who are these others, Alan—these rivals?"

"There is Ernest Mervin, and Mr. Maitland and Captain"—

"Hush, hush," interrupted his mother, and her tone implied how far beneath notice she considered those whom Alan enumerated. "That Ernest Mervin is a poor-looking fellow, Mr. Maitland has gone away, and Captain Davenport rarely sees her. Silly, silly Alan!"

"Mr. Maitland has been over to see her."

"I can easily understand that Mr. Maitland likes Muriel," said Mrs. Murray; "but I do not think that Muriel will care for him. She will be difficult to win, but I think that—you—will—win—her."

Alan's face brightened, and he drew himself up.

"I shall try at any rate," he said frankly. "All my powers shall be set forth to win such a creature as Muriel. I will wait patiently for her, mother. Months shall be as days, so earnestly shall I be bent on attaining my desire. Like Jacob of old, I will work seven years, and yet another seven for my Rachel."

Two large tears gathered in Mrs. Murray's eyes, dimming their lustre for a moment, and then like large pearls rolled softly down each cheek.

"Go in and win," she said softly; "you are just like your father was, Alan. I wish you God-speed."

Alan touched his mother's forehead with his lips, then going to the table, he took his choice bouquet up tenderly.

"I must get these flowers put in a box; Royle has it somewhere."

He went towards the bell.

"Stop," said his mother, "I will do that for you. Tell Muriel, with my love, that I wrapped these up for her."

"May I do as much for you," asked Alan, with meaning, "when you are sending a bouquet to Sir Phillip Verdun?"

The faintest flush covered Mrs. Murray's face.

"*When* I do such a thing, I will accept your help, Alan."

"Come, come, mother; who is equivocating now?"

"Well, my dear boy, you can scarcely expect me to send presents to Sir Phillip. That is his privilege—a gentleman's privilege always."

"And one that he makes the most of," retorted Alan laughing. "I can imagine the servants groaning under the extra running about and carrying that his cadeaux give."

"It all comes in a lifetime," said Mrs. Murray carelessly. "Now about your present; what time do you wish to start?"

"As soon as I can possibly manage to do so; my horse is waiting."

"It shall not wait much longer then on my account. What is it you want?" she asked, turning to a servant who had entered.

"Sir Phillip Verdun is here, ma'am. He wishes to see you."

"Then, Alan, I must ask you to excuse my services for to-day. Next time you are going will doubtless do as well, and I shall be able to bestow proper care on them then. Adieu, my son."

And Mrs. Murray, getting up, walked to the door and kissed her hand to Alan.

"It strikes me that matters are coming to a conclusion there," muttered Alan to himself, "and if I do not soon win my dainty Muriel, this house will be without a lady mistress. Heigho, how I wish my pearl was here for all time; she should never regret her coming. Just fancy having her always in the house to consult and chat with. It would nearly be heaven."

Such thoughts as these inspired Alan, and it was not many minutes before he started. Just a few words to Sir Phillip to do "the polite," as he expressed himself, and then Alan was galloping towards his love as fast as he could go. All the way along "hope told a flattering tale," and when he entered the Astley Park lodge gates, and descried Muriel in the distance sitting under the shelter of a large oak tree, he for a moment thought he must be mistaken. A second glance soon told him that she was really there reading. A large black dog lay at her feet—her hat thrown carelessly down near him. A pretty picture, and one that Alan drank in greedily. Perfectly unconscious was she that any one was approaching, so softly fell the horse's

footfall on the grassy park; and Alan might perhaps have reached her before she had become aware of his advent had it not been for the quicker ears of the dog. He jumped up and barked loudly. Muriel looked round and saw Alan. A pleased expression stole into her face; she closed her book and stood up to welcome him. He jumped off his horse and fastened it to a tree; then with one hand he picked up the fallen hat, whilst with the other he clasped her outstretched one.

"You must keep this on your head," he remarked kindly. "Hats were made to wear, and not to throw on the grass. Down dog, down. Where did you get him from, Muriel? He is a fresh importation."

"There is no sun, Alan, and even if there were I have no complexion to spoil."

"I do not know that," returned Alan, looking fondly at the sweet face, "but I do know that the wind will give you cold. It is the least bit easterly, and your health is of more consequence than all the complexions that ever existed."

"It is lucky for you that Caroline cannot hear that fearful remark," said Muriel, laughing in slight confusion. "And talking about taking cold, Alan, I should think you run a far greater risk. I have a camp stool to sit on, whilst you are lying on the grass."

Alan had thrown himself full length at her feet, and the dog was eyeing him suspiciously.

"Oh, I am strong," replied Alan, as if speaking

in great contempt of himself; "a great strong fellow, but you are fragile and delicate."

"That I am not," said Muriel laughing aloud. "It is impossible to get up any sentiment about me, Alan. I am the picture of rude health, and no one can make me out any different; can they, my beautiful Bear?"

The dog turned his solemn eyes round on his mistress, moved a little nearer, and licked her hand.

"Is he not a beauty, Alan?" asked Muriel, cuddling the large shaggy head fondly. "Oh, you beautiful Bear!"

Bear seemed to understand it all. He stood in grave silence suffering the caress.

"Where did you get the brute from?" asked Alan.

"Ernest brought him to me a week ago. He knows I prefer large dogs; there is something so noble about them. Not like that detestable, spiteful little Bijou, whom I perfectly abominated. Do you remember him? Why, it's that one which is in the hall stuffed," said Muriel, suddenly recollecting, "and I assure you, Alan, he looks ever so much better now than he did in life. He has not got such a vicious expression. Bijou knew which side his bread was buttered, and he was pampered and petted until he snarled at every one but Mrs. Duerdon. The servants gave him many a kick privately."

"How did you know?" inquired Alan, laughing.

"I used to see them. They never minded me in those days. It was when Mrs. Duerdon used to—used to"—

"Used to what?" put in Alan, in a particularly dense way.

"When she disliked me so much, and was not kind to me," replied Muriel reluctantly.

"Oh, was that all?" exclaimed Alan. "You need not have hesitated about that, Murie. I know what a tartar she always was, in fact still is in many ways."

"No; she is kindness itself now, and it was, as you know, all Norman's doing. Alan, we have had a letter from Winchester this morning. Owen seems to be very happy."

"That's satisfactory. Murie, I have brought the flowers for dear Norman's grave."

The glad light shone in Muriel's eyes at once. Her face was perfectly radiant.

"Kind, thoughtful Alan." Then, with a recollection flashing over her, "Where have you put them? They are surely not in your pockets. Oh! if they are they will be crushed."

"Do you see the box anywhere?" asked Alan mischievously. "Do my pockets look suspicious?"

Muriel looked first at one side and then the other.

"They are as flat as a pancake," said she decidedly. "Oh, Alan, have you spoilt them?"

"No, fair lady. Look about my horse's neck. See if you can find them there."

Muriel looked, but at first saw nothing. At last she espied them.

"What a clever contrivance!" she exclaimed rapturously. "How ever did you fix them there? I wonder your horse allows them to remain."

"My horse knows his master," replied Alan. "I had to teach him. Once that lesson is learnt all the rest is easy."

Muriel looked up inquiringly.

"I suppose all animals must have masters," she said thoughtfully; "they seem better for it. But I should never have a master. I would never obey any one unless I chose to do so."

"You are an animal, Muriel. Everything that has life is an animal."

"I am not, Alan."

"You declare that your education is completed, and you do not know the simple rudiments at starting. Fie, Murie! About Bear, who is his master?"

"Ernest was, of course. Now I suppose I shall be."

"A nice master you will make. Why even Bijou, that small mite, snapped at you. Bear will eat you up."

"Bear will do nothing of the kind. Will you, old fellow?"

The dog might have known his mistress spoke to him, he nestled up so closely to her, and lay near winking and blinking furtively at Alan.

"Who do you mean by Ernest?" demanded

Alan suddenly. "Surely you do not mean Ernest Mervin?"

"Sans doute. Whom else should I mean?"

"Murie, you ought to respect young Mr. Mervin more. Keep him at a farther distance from you instead of calling everybody Dick, Tom, and Harry."

"Mr. Murray, you forget yourself. There are only two people whom I venture to address thus familiarly, and they were both intimate friends of my brother."

"Ernest Mervin has been away a long time; you ought to forget him, and certainly if you still remember him you should address him as Mr. Ernest," observed Alan moodily. "I do not understand you venturing to say Ernest."

Muriel's head drooped.

"Of course, Alan, when he first returned I saluted him as Mr. Mervin, but that sounded so very strange after all our childhood's days, and his letting Norman ride to school on his pony, and being otherwise so kind, that I gradually got to Mr. Ernest, but even that seemed distant, and when he remarked it I soon left out the Mr. altogether."

"He remarked it?" repeated Alan jealously.

"Yes, he did, or I should never have changed. He said, 'Miss Murie, have you forgotten me?' and what could I say?"

"Told the truth, and owned that you had quite let him slip out of your life."

"But that would have been false," declared Muriel bravely. "I shall never forget Ernest."

"Just because he happened to let Norman ride once or twice on his pony. Why I thought your brother had a pony of his own, that beautiful Sultan of yours."

"He had not one until Dr. Green made him a present of one, and then at the very worst time Sultan fell lame, and Ernest gave up his pony for dear Norman's use. It was very good and unselfish of him, and I shall always like him for it."

"I would have done the same."

"I know you would, Alan, and I like you, as you know, but do not mind me thinking well of Ernest; he deserves my gratitude."

"What that Dr. Green went and left you all his money for," remarked Alan in an aggrieved tone, "is a mystery to me. And what a fuss was made about it, as if it had been such a fortune."

"It was a large fortune to me, Alan, who had not a penny of my own."

"A mere fleabite. Why, Muriel, I have as much yearly."

"Still mine is just as acceptable to me. The interest of that and of dear mamma's money suffices for all my wants."

"You manage to give a great deal away," continued Alan, speaking as if everything was a personal offence to him.

The fact was he was upset about Ernest.

"I do not think I should care to have money

and keep it all to myself," said Muriel, looking straight at Alan through her tear-dimmed eyes. "Bear, old fellow, our friend is not kind this morning."

Alan was recalled to himself by this rebuke.

"You still allow then that I am your friend," he observed quickly. "Ernest has not quite put my nose out of joint."

"Of course he has not," replied Muriel in surprise. "You are my brother, Alan. Do not you remember Norman wished it?"

"Yes, you are my dearest sister. Oh, by the way, Murie, we heard from Barbara this morning."

"Your real sister. How strange it is, Alan; Mrs. Wyncourt, your sister, so far off as Ceylon, and my brother away, away in heaven," said Muriel in a low tone, "while you and I can always see so much of one another, and remain brother and sister all our lives."

Alan made no response. It would have puzzled him just then to make a suitable one. After a pause he said—

"Murie, that is a very ugly dog Ernest has given you. Return it, and I will send you a better."

"Give up my beautiful Bear!" exclaimed Muriel in alarm. "I could not do that. We are so attached to each other. No, I would not part with him for a hundred prettier dogs."

And Muriel threw her arms round Bear's

neck as if she feared Alan might take him by force.

"Well, if you prefer an ugly creature, keep him," retorted Alan, beginning to lose his temper. "I gave you credit for better taste, Murie."

"My affection outweighs all taste," she replied dauntlessly.

"And what is Ernest like?" proceeded Alan. "Has he grown any handsomer or any taller?"

"No; he is just the same. His face is not altered a bit, only he has a great quantity of hair about it, a long thick beard, and bushy whiskers —in fact hair all over, except just round his spectacles. He has not grown, and is, I believe, stouter than formerly."

"Good heavens defend us," exclaimed Alan, in affright, "what a hideous description. Ernest must be plainer than ever."

"He is not handsome."

"Handsome, oh all ye gods listen to her. Fancy the greatest duffer ever considering Ernest handsome. The plainest, ah the ugliest man alive."

"He has a kind face, Alan, and is very nice."

"Oh, Murie, forbear, spare my feelings. You should not have parted Bear and his master, they were a pair."

"A pair—what in?"

"In ugliness—like master like man."

"You are misquoting that text," declared Muriel, in dignified rebuke. "Bear is handsomer

than his master was,—at least" she added, hastily, "you would have thought so, I daresay."

"Umph! they are a lovely pair."

"Alan," exclaimed Muriel, jumping up, "let us go into the house. You are a deception. You always told me that beauty was nothing, appearances deceptive, and ever so much more, until I actually believed you."

"Well, I meant of course appearance to a certain extent, beauty in a modified degree. But when we get to talking of out-and-out plain people why then we might not exactly agree in our ideas."

"Alan, I believe you think you are handsome," declared Muriel, staunchly; standing and looking at the fine figure before her.

"Of course I do, and so do you, Muriel."

Muriel's head went down. She was too truthful to contradict him; too unwilling to increase his vanity, so she did not speak.

"There is not a handsomer fellow nor a finer fellow in all the country," said Alan, laughing merrily. "Come, own it, Muriel."

But she shook her head.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity, Alan."

And then she went and patted his horse and Bear trotted after her.

"Alan, have you done wisely," she asked, "in allowing your horse to stand here so long. He seems to be shivering."

"I may have been careless," acknowledged Alan, "he was so hot when I got here. Let me have a canter, Murie, and take him in the stables, then I will return to you."

"Had we not better go in?"

"Not for a little bit longer. Wrap your shawl round you my"—. He stopped abruptly, he had nearly said darling. "Let me put it on your shoulders. There now, you take a little walk and I will return and read to you."

Muriel's face brightened. She dearly enjoyed hearing Alan read. But not more than he delighted to be in her company.

He spent a long day with her, a day that was full of happiness after he once forgot all jealous fears of Ernest. And when he returned home at night he told his mother that he thought he was winning his way into Muriel's heart, she was so good and gentle to him.

"Did she like the flowers, Alan?"

"She did, mother, she seemed to love them, and together we placed them on Norman's grave."

The mother said no more, yet she knew that another image beside her own was enshrined in her son's heart. For years she had reigned supreme, but the time had come for her to be deposed. It was one of nature's laws. She knew and recognised it as such. Had she not, however, had interests and affections of her own at stake just then, she might not have taken it so meekly.

CHAPTER VI.

"CAROLINE, Caroline," called Mr. Mervin's quavering voice from the foot of the stairs.

"What's grandpapa calling for now?" exclaimed Caroline, in an aggrieved tone. "He's always wanting some one to wait on him as if there's nothing else to do besides attending to his whims and fancies. Let him call."

And call the old vicar did.

"Caroline, Caroline, where are you?"

But Miss Danvers was imperturbable. No answer gave she, but continued arranging and rearranging her wardrobe, and making the remark to herself, undutiful girl that she was, "Let him call."

By-and-bye a shout in a loud distinct voice—"Shall I do, father?" and a sound of footsteps hurrying down the stairs, apprised Caroline that her Uncle Ernest had not been equally disobliging.

"He's gone, has he," observed the selfish girl, taking a flimsy dress for light evening wear off the bed; and throwing it over her shoulders, she paraded the bedroom with it on. "Well he's not much to look at. Not ornamental certainly. There cannot be two opinions on that point. He is the greatest fright, and oh! so abominably stupid. My beauty comes from the Danvers' side

of the house I expect, for there is none to be seen on the Mervins'. I wonder what grandpapa wanted now. Dropped his paper or his pen and cannot stoop to pick them up. I never saw such a man. I am glad I did not go. He must learn to wait on himself or else get that blessed Ernest. Umph! Uncle Ernest I suppose I must call him. What a nuisance it is, having a man of his age and appearance to call uncle. Well, I must teach Uncle Ernest to wait on his father hand and foot. I am not going to do it, and so I can tell him. Not with my good looks. All my beauty is wasting on the desert air here, or whatever the song says about it. I believe that is somewhere near; ah, I remember—'wasting her sweetness on the desert air,' that's just me, and I do not mean to do it. Ernest is soft enough for anything, I will vacate the post for him. Ah, who's there?"

Caroline's soliloquies were brought to an abrupt termination by a loud knock at her door.

"Well, and what do you want?" she asked, abruptly, and in no way pleased with the girl who stood there.

"Miss Muriel's downstairs, and wants you, miss. The master has been calling you ever so long, and Mr. Ernest and him is a entertaining of her."

"Why could you not have told me that sooner, instead of letting me remain here amusing myself?"

"I came as soon as I knew, Miss Caroline. The master was walking in the garden and met her.

He gathered a few of those flowers like violets, I do not know what they're called, and she seemed so pleased."

"Anything pleases her," returned Caroline, contemptuously, and going to a large cheval glass she surveyed herself critically. "Maria how do I look?" she asked, turning round, "does not this shade suit my complexion? Shall I not look well at the Forsters' party?"

The girl, who was pretty, with soft brown eyes and shiny hair, appeared to be rather doubtful.

"It's too flimsy, Miss Caroline. I like dresses as has some wear in them."

And then looking down, she continued—

"Miss Muriel looks very nice to-day, and your grandpapa did seem pleased to see her. He *went* to meet her with his hand held out, and she thought he was going to fall, and she ran up to him, and said—'Do not hurry, Mr. Mervin, it's only me,' and you should have seen her face, it looked so bright and pleasant."

"Just like Muriel," muttered Caroline, "she is a goose. I wish she had been here and I had been in her shoes. Would I not have caught Alan long ago."

"Did you wish you was Miss Muriel?" asked Maria, catching at part of the sentence.

"No, you great stupid; run downstairs and say I am coming. Stay though, one minute. What did grandpapa say to Muriel when she hurried to meet him?"

"He said—'God bless you, my child, I am always pleased to see you, Muriel.'"

"Then he need not have gone and stuck her up any more than she is stuck up already. He never speaks to me like that, though I am always slaving about attending to his wants. That is just grandpapa all over, he is ever ready to think any one nice but his own family."

But if Caroline had applied this remark to herself instead of to her grandfather, it would have been more applicable, and so any looker-on would have declared, had they a few minutes later witnessed her effusive greeting with Muriel.

"You dear, dear stranger," she declared, kissing Muriel, who rather shrank back from such warmth and demonstration. "I began to think you were never coming again to see us. Did Alan give you my message?"

"No. I do not remember any," replied Muriel, pausing to consider, and trying at the same time to wipe surreptitiously the cheek which Caroline had kissed, but being detected in the act, dropped her handkerchief awkwardly.

"I sent my love, and begged that you would come to tea as soon as ever you could do so."

Muriel scarcely knew what to say. She did not believe that Caroline had sent such a message, else why had not Alan delivered it! So she said, simply—

"Thank you, Caroline."

"We both tried our best to persuade Muriel to

stay to-day," interposed Ernest, "but all our efforts were unsuccessful."

"Although I used my utmost endeavours," asserted Mr. Mervin. "Muriel is always such a favourite of mine that I consider her refusal—persistent refusal, cruel."

"But you must not think anything of the kind," declared Muriel, brightly, "I would have stayed if I could—Norman," and then her voice trembled, "was always so fond of coming here."

"Gentle Norman, blessed spirit," sighed Mr. Mervin.

"Muriel, you only require my pleadings," exclaimed Caroline. "Come let us have your hat and jacket without another word. I will run upstairs with them, and we can have a most pleasant evening."

"Do be persuaded," urged Ernest.

"I should require no persuasion," answered Muriel, "if I were disengaged this evening. But we are going out to a stiff party instead. How much nicer to stay here and enjoy myself."

"Stop then, and throw the stiff dinner party over," pleaded Ernest. And in a lower voice he said—"Do stay, we will make it all right for you. It is such a treat to have you here."

Without a shade of embarrassment, or the faintest accession of colour, Muriel turned to him.

"Oh Ernest," she said, laughing, "you a clergyman, trying to persuade me to throw duty

to the winds, and go in for pleasure; fie of you. Mr. Mervin, what do you think of your son?"

"Eh, my dear," said the vicar. The fact was his thoughts had been wandering. The matter had to be fully entered into and explained to him, much to Caroline's mortification, who muttered that he would have been far better in his study, and when Ernest asked what she had said, she favoured him with a sweet smile, and—

"Oh, Ernest, why do you not spare grandpapa, it bothers him, being asked questions."

To every one's surprise, however, Mr. Mervin replied—

"Not at all, my dear, not at all. Ask Muriel to come to-morrow evening, and take no denial."

Thus urged, Muriel was obliged to go. In walking home it suddenly occurred to her mind how pressing Ernest had been in his manner.

"You must come," he said, "we long for you as we long for the sunshine."

Muriel had taken his remark as a joke, but he had not meant it so, neither had he liked her to laugh at him and treat all his speeches in such a sisterly way. At parting too he had held her hand a most unwarrantably long time, but she had not seized it away. She seemed to regard all his attentions as most natural.

"Ernest means to be very kind, very kind, I daresay," cogitated Muriel, on her homeward walk, "but I do not care for him as I used to do. Yet how good he is to his father, it is nice to see

him. I wonder whether Caroline did not hear her grandpapa calling. I suppose she did not, yet he tried his best to make her. And when she did come down, she never apologized to any one, and she must have known how long I had been there. Very pretty is Caroline, but not lovable somehow, not to me anyway, though she did kiss me so gushingly. Caroline somehow is not my idea of a girl made to be loved. Admired, paid homage to, and all that sort of thing, but not loved. I should like to know wherein consists the difference. The distinction is not at all clear to my mind, but there is one nevertheless; I think most people would love Nora Stanhope, and she I hear is engaged to be married. Dear me, is that the clock striking, I am later than I thought, I must hurry home to dress."

She encountered Mr. Duerdon as she was entering the house.

"Been out, Muriel?" he inquired, "visiting some poor, my dear?"

"Not this time," answered Muriel, putting an umbrella which she had taken in case of rain into the hat stand, "I have been to the Vicarage."

"And how is the vicar?"

"Only feeble, I am afraid. Not strong on his feet, and rather absent at times."

"Ah, it is what we are all coming to, my dear. Time is cruel if death lets him keep us. He mocks at our attempts at youthfulness, and soon takes the shine away."

"Quite right," responded Muriel, "and he will treat me badly too if I do not avail myself speedily of the next half-hour. I must run off quickly."

And she disappeared upstairs.

The next afternoon she was almost ready to start on her expedition to the Vicarage. She had her large hat on. It nearly covered the thoughtful face, and shaded the clear truthful eyes, which looked on the world so soberly. She was having a hunt for a particular pair of gloves when a servant came to tell her that Alan was downstairs.

"I will come directly," she said. "I have lost a pair of gloves, Sarah, brown ones; if you find them anywhere put them in my glove case. I must wear others this afternoon." And she drew a crumpled pair out of her pocket.

Without one glance at herself in the glass, without a final touch which often gives such a finish and grace to a lady's toilet, Muriel hurried from the room.

"I wonder what has brought Alan over to-day?" she queried. "Perhaps he will go with me to the Vicarage. They would be pleased to see him."

"They" was a pretty wide berth to give expression to her feelings in. Had she said, "Caroline will be glad," it would have been nearer the mark. That was what she meant. Nevertheless, whatever had brought Alan to Astley Muriel was pleased, almost demonstratively pleased, to see him.

"How good of you, Alan," she exclaimed, "to come over. Can you stay?"

"I came with that purpose," he answered. "My mother is still away, and it is lonely at home. Mrs. Duerdon has given me a standing invitation to come, as you know, whenever I like. I thought I would avail myself of it."

Muriel, who was standing quite close to him, took his hand. There was no coquetry in the action; no studied effect intended; merely a sign of the kindly affection that she ever bore for him. Alan understood the caress, and his heart fell. If she loved him dared she have betrayed herself by even such a simple act as that? He almost feared not. Alan as yet understood not a love that might be strong as death, and yet the possessor of it be perfectly unconscious that the love was there. Natures like Muriel's, in their unselfishness, are totally unaware that their hearts have gone into another's keeping until some great event, some startling *dénouement* takes place, or else until some small unimportant act opens their blinded eyes. They have to be wakened either one way or the other.

"That is delightful," declared Muriel, joyously, a full measure of content filling her heart, though she guessed not the cause. She had dreaded a long evening at the Vicarage, she always missed Norman's presence even although he had been dead so many years.

"You have your outdoor costume on, Murie. Where have you been?"

"I am going to take tea at the Vicarage. You

will join me. Let us go and tell Mrs. Duerdon and then we will let Bear loose and start."

Muriel spoke eagerly. It was such an unexpected pleasure having Alan with her. Strange that he did not read the glad face, the happy tones aright. But he did not. Jealousy, which is generally painted green, but which would be far better painted black—for what vice is blacker than the hideous monster—had entered his head. He thought all Muriel's joy and delight was because she was going to see Ernest.

"You seem very pleased to be going to the Vicarage," he remarked, moodily, tapping his boot with a small riding whip he held in his hand. "I will not stay to-night."

"Oh, do, Alan," pleaded Muriel, raising her eyes pleadingly to his face. "Do please stay, we can have such a nice evening together."

Alan was partly mollified, but only partly so. He was not aware that Muriel could turn him round her little finger. Yet so it really was. Strong, sturdy self-willed, Alan, in spite of his six feet, and over, was a mere infant in her hands *when she exerted her influence.* But she knew it no more than he did.

"Yes, stay, and be in the way," he said. "Play gooseberry to you and Ernest. I should think so. I should spoil sport, Murie. I had better go back." Alan's tones belied his words. They said "Go," but his voice implied a certain unwillingness to leave her he loved.

Muriel looked at him thoughtfully, and there was surprise on her expressive face. She did not understand his present mood.

"I scarcely know what you mean, Alan. But if you think they will not be delighted to welcome you, I am sure you are mistaken."

Alan pooh-poohed restlessly, but Muriel went on unheeding—

"I need not say how more than pleased I shall be if you come. Such a remark seems to me very unnecessary; but, Alan, if I caught your speech aright it implied a doubt of me. Oh, Alan, my friend, nay more, my adopted brother, what has come between us to cause you to fear my welcome?"

Muriel spoke with the greatest intensity, far more than she was any way conscious of. Her soul was aroused just then, and it shone in her eyes. For the first time Alan began to read her heart. A hope grew within him that he was not indifferent to her. Eagerly, hopefully he jumped up. He had been sitting whilst, strange to say, she had been standing, an omission of politeness on Alan's part that was rare. Perhaps she had sat down before he took a seat, and in her excitement had risen.

"You mean all you have said, Muriel—you mean every word of it? Oh, say it again, tell me once more how welcome I am. Nay, stay, give me your hand on it."

Without the least hesitation Muriel complied

with his request. But if she had expected that he was going to take it quietly as he had hitherto done, she was vastly mistaken. He seized it demonstratively, and clasped the small hand warmly, roughly almost, between his own. She tried to extricate it. The warm colour flew into her face, and a glow suffused her that she never remembered feeling before. The more she tried to get it loose the firmer Alan held it.

"No, no," he said, "I will not let you go."

Then such a feeling of awkwardness came over Muriel. She did not know how or where to look, and it made her strangely uncomfortable. She began to wonder whether she was dreaming. It was all so new. But even as she wondered tears came into her eyes. They might not have been tears of sorrow but of joy. Alan only read them one way. He saw them, and thought he had pained her, so he put one of his strong paws down and clasped the little hand tenderly with the other, and Muriel looked satisfied.

"Did you doubt my being glad to welcome you any time and anywhere?" she asked, lifting her eyes timidly to his face."

For an answer Alan raised the hand he held and kissed it.

"Oh, Alan," murmured Muriel, deprecatingly, "please let us go now." But he held her hand all the same.

"Murie, my darling," he began, tenderly, "may I hope"—

And at that juncture, that unfortunate juncture, the door opened, and Mrs. Duerdon walked in. What could have been more unfortunate than that? One more moment and words would have been spoken that would have ensured the happiness of two as loving hearts as ever breathed; words that would have settled the fate of two beings both for time and perhaps for eternity. But Mrs. Duerdon recked little of this. With a want of tact arising solely from her thoughts of self and self alone, she went on into the room, although she might have seen, had she cared, the commotion she was creating. Muriel would have flown from Alan's side. Her eyes were opened. Her heart read like a book even to herself in those few moments, and she would have gone from him, but Alan would not suffer it. He held the hand firmly, and it was not until Mrs. Duerdon reached him that he let it go. Whether that lady really understood that Alan cared for Muriel, cared for her that is with the love that meant to single her and her alone out of the whole world, it is impossible to say. Her face was not moved one whit. Not the slightest shade of astonishment crossed her features. Not the faintest breath betrayed emotion. And yet surely if she had become cognisant of such an unexpected matter, unexpected to her surely, after all she had predicted of Muriel so far as love and marriage were concerned, if for the first time she saw that all her prophecies were incorrect, and that the once greatly

despised Muriel was likely to make the best match for miles and miles around, not to say in the whole county, she must have shown it some way or other. It was either the perfection of acting or the dulness of a mind all set on its own enjoyment. Or again it might be the deadness of indifference. Whatever cause affected Mrs. Duerdon there was no outward sign to read her face, merely because there was no feeling there. She wore the same fretful look as ever. No astonishment or pleasure, no amazement or chagrin was depicted on her countenance.

"Mr. Duerdon told me that he thought he had seen your horse coming down the avenue, Alan," she remarked, in just the same tone that she had used for ever so many years. Like the face the voice betrayed nothing—two most expressive indications alike silent.

Muriel, who was recovering, could not help wondering whether Mrs. Duerdon's manner was real or assumed. She had felt so completely caught herself that she could not imagine that the person who caught her should be ignorant of the fact; and if not ignorant, how could Mrs. Duerdon bear so calmly a shock or surprise which had altered so completely the current of Muriel's life. It must be assumed she avowed.

Yet, as the conversation continued for the next few minutes, Muriel could but observe how significantly the lady left her out of the subject. She neither said anything that Muriel could reply to,

neither did she address herself at all to Muriel. But Alan took care that she should not be neglected. He always carefully brought her in in the conversation, and perhaps this very fact only made the lady's reticence more remarkable.

"So you are going to the Vicarage, Alan," observed Mrs. Duerdon, at last, as if weary of talking, and anxious to get rid of him.

Alan turned to Muriel. "That was what you decided, was it not, Muriel?" and his bright eyes rested lovingly on the young girl before him.

"We had better be off, too," answered Muriel. "The afternoons close in so quickly. Will you come with me, and let Bear loose, or will"—

"Whoever heard such a heathenish, outlandish name as Bear?" interrupted Mrs. Duerdon, and for the first time during the interview she looked Muriel straight in the face.

There was much in the glance, and Muriel caught it, little as it was intended that she should do so. She knew for certain at once that Mrs. Duerdon was well aware of Alan's intentions. There was the slightest shade of confusion perceptible in Muriel's behaviour as she said good afternoon to Mrs. Duerdon. Why or wherefore she felt confused she could scarcely have said, for she did not really so much mind any one seeing Alan hold her hand. Perhaps Mrs. Duerdon's equanimity and unconsciousness of manner upset Muriel more than anything else could have done, especially when by a mere glance she detected that the lady

was trying to hide the knowledge which she had gained. It was not until they were out in the Park, Bear careering before them, that Alan got the least opportunity of talking to Muriel again; but the time had gone by for an explanation that day. Muriel, reserved and shy, would not give Alan a chance of speaking. There was the free world around; the green velvety carpet spread under their feet, almost limitless, so far as the eye could see, without walls to confine them in space. At the least approach to a declaration, Muriel went stiff and dignified, even if she stayed at his side. She had not the least intention of encouraging him, and that he saw.

"Let us go into the Cedar Walk," he begged, at last.

There at least she could not run away from him.

"We have not time. Alan, whistle for Bear, he has run off ever so far. I should not like to lose him."

Alan put his two hands together, and whistled school-boy fashion—shrill and loud.

"Bear is coming. Now, Murie, give me your hand, and let us wander away for awhile before we go into the presence of the fair Caroline."

But Muriel did not care for a repetition of the afternoon's wooing. She answered as though he had never spoken.

"Oh, Bear is running away again. Do call him Alan, please."

Alan reverted to his former plan, but it was un-

successful this time. He disengaged his silver whistle from its chain, and blew loudly through that; still without effect.

"Very strange," he exclaimed. "That dog must be properly trained. No animal of mine would be so disobedient."

"Bear is generally obedience itself," replied Muriel, willing to exonerate her dog from all blame, and fearful that Alan might intend some reproof to Ernest for not having had the creature better trained. "Besides, Alan, I would not let him go to any one to be unkindly or, perhaps, cruelly treated."

Alan made no answer to this remark. He was shading his eyes with his hands—not from the sun, but trying to strain his sight as far as he could.

"My conjectures are right," he said. "Muric, your dog has been to meet some one. What an abominable nuisance! If it is Caroline I shall be off."

"It's more probably Ernest," said Muriel eagerly.

She was relieved, glad that any one should interrupt her tête-á-tête with Alan. Her heart was beating with its weight of happiness, but she dreaded strangely any further talk alone.

"If it's Ernest I shall disappear also," declared Alan, and he clenched his hands together in annoyance that they should have been so inopportunely disturbed that afternoon; disturbed twice,

when hitherto it had been a rare event for them to be disturbed at all.

"It is Caroline," exclaimed Muriel excitedly. "Look, Alan, I can see her dress through the trees. Bear remembers her, and is bounding backwards and forwards between her and us. Each step they gain on us. Shall we go and meet them?"

"No, by Jove," replied Alan in as vexed a voice as it was possible for him, with his usual good-tempered disposition, to use. "No, Muriel, I'll be off."

"Do not—oh, do not go, Alan," she pleaded. "Why should you mind meeting Caroline? You promised to go there to tea with me, and then you would have met her. Please stay."

But for once Alan resisted Muriel's entreaties.

"I cannot go now," he said; "not until—ah, well, Murie, I will be over to-morrow some time, and spend the evening at your house; then we will make up for this interruption, my darling girl. Look at me, Murie; one smile to comfort me in my loneliness. I cannot bear to leave you. But then, by Jove, Caroline is nearly here; hide me until I get off."

It was a very wistful smile that Muriel threw Alan. How she wished that she had not made the promise to go to the Vicarage; but the next instant she blamed herself for selfishness and want of spirit. With one lingering look after Alan, who was striding off as fast as his legs could carry him, and disappearing in the distance, she turned and

went to meet Caroline. Bear nearly knocked her down in his glad welcome. He tried to say as well as he could,

"I have been to fetch a friend of mine to see you. Are you not pleased?" and he bounded from one to the other.

Caroline was very gaily dressed. She seemed quite got up for the occasion.

"I thought you never were coming," she said; "and so grandpapa suggested that I should come and see after you."

"Very kind of you all," replied Muriel. "I should have come shortly though, without any seeking. Alan has been over, and I could not come."

"Alan been over; where is he?" exclaimed Caroline eagerly. "Uncle Ernest said he was sure he saw him ride through the village, and he told me to come on quickly and invite him to join us. Is he in the house, Muriel? Let us turn; I know he is anxious to see me. We have something to talk about—a secret between our two selves alone."

Muriel's lips half parted as if to speak, but she checked herself. A smile rose to her lips as she remembered Alan's anxiety to avoid Caroline; it seemed such a clear contradiction to Muriel's mind. She had the advantage of witnessing both sides of the play. But it was not polite to smile or to stand speechless after Caroline's questioning, yet she scarcely knew what to do or what to say.

"Oh, Muriel," exclaimed Caroline impatiently, "whatever are you thinking about? Where is Alan? Is he at your house, or has he gone? There is no use standing here staring at each other."

"No, Carrie, you are right; let us go to the Vicarage. I do not think—I do not know—at least, I think Alan will be gone home. If we hurry we shall get on to the avenue, and if his horse and he go by, we shall be ready to speak to him."

"Yes, we will go on to the avenue," answered Caroline, "as quickly as we can. But not towards the Vicarage, but straight to your house. I want to see Alan if I can, and it almost appears as if you were anxious to get us separated altogether. You never try to get us to meet, though you know we both desire it. I consider you spiteful and unkind, Muriel Vivian."

Caroline spoke with a great deal of temper. Disappointment and mortified vanity had upset her. She knew for a fact—had seen, indeed, Alan ride up to the Park gates when she was standing within the small shop of one of the parishioners. To rush home, don her gayest attire, and walk to the Duerdons, was quickly done. To walk slower through the Park and round through the cedar path, to declare she came at her grandfather's instigation, was all a ruse—a false and deceitful ruse, which only half imposed on Muriel, although in her uncomfortable position she let it pass.

Muriel could not well say, "Alan was with me; he ran off when he saw you coming." Neither, in fact, could she even allude to his having just left her, for Caroline would naturally insist on entering into particulars; and Muriel, in her delicate refinement, shrank from saying the slightest thing to hurt Caroline, or to implicate Alan; while, on the other hand, she would not condescend to escape by telling a falsehood. But when she began to be abused, called spiteful and unkind, then Muriel rose on her mettle. It was so unjustifiable, so unfounded and unwarrantable an accusation.

"We will go wherever you like," she declared in righteous indignation. "If you want to see Alan, the best place to find him will be at the stables. Come along quickly."

Muriel put her best foot foremost, and Caroline kept up in a half running pace at her side. They had to go round the back of the house to get to the stables. Muriel seemed in such high dudgeon that she was almost unconscious of what she was doing, and she walked so fast that she almost panted for breath; and never did she stop nor falter until they reached their destination. Then she said somewhat disdainfully—

"Here are the stables, Carrie. You can go in and inquire if Alan is gone or not."

Caroline's spirits had risen high with expectation during that hurried run. She seldom saw Alan, and she really, in her way, cared for him. Her great desire to see him was, perhaps, only

natural and excusable, but not so her temper and injustice. Her spirits sank to zero directly Muriel spoke.

"I cannot go in there alone—by myself, to seek Alan," she said confusedly. "You go, Muriel, and tell him I am outside here, and that he can see me if he desires. Stay, say I have got a message from grandpapa."

"That is sufficient excuse for you surely," replied Muriel, in no way abating her disdainful manner. "I have no inclination for going into the stables. You can go if you choose."

Caroline was at her wits' end. To have Alan within speaking distance quite close enough to see only for walls built up between them; walls, which Caroline, in her intense longing, could have almost cursed, yet innocent, impenetrable barriers which, though substantial and thick, were as very pie crust in comparison to the bars and hindrances which really separated her from Alan. These drawbacks, however, Caroline did not see. Her vanity, like a thick veil, hid them from view. She cared for Alan, and not all the quiet hints which are all a gentleman can show a lady, sufficed to tell her that Alan did not return the compliment.

A girl so much admired as was Caroline fails to see that beauty is not everything with some people. And it is a singular fact that these lovely faces, nine times out of ten, miss the mark in gaining the love they would desire. Love after love is offered to them it may be, but rarely the love they

would like. God has not given everything when He has bestowed beauty; He has many another gift left. Caroline lost sight of this fact in her exaggerated idea of her charms, and moreover in her great eagerness to see Alan she bade fair to lose all discretion and lady-like reticence, for she laid hold of Muriel's arm tightly, and with excited anxiety pleaded—

"Oh, Muriel, do not be unkind, I so rarely see Alan, do this little favour for me and I will be your friend for ever. Alan—Alan cares—for me—do go."

It seemed as if the falsehood that Caroline was deliberately uttering stuck in her throat, such difficulty had she in getting it out.

Muriel disengaged herself from Caroline's detaining hand not over gently.

"Come away then," she said, in a hard voice, "it is no good dawdling here, Alan will not care to meet us."

"He may not care to see you," retorted Caroline, angrily. "Speak for yourself, he will be pleased to see me. You can go on to the Vicarage, I will return later with Alan."

Muriel needed no second bidding, she was off like a shot back round by the stables, on through the cedar walk straight through to the avenue, and for the first time she stopped, and then it suddenly occurred to her that she had lost Bear. Where had the dog gone? Was he with Caroline? She could not remember seeing him near the stables. There was nothing for it but to go

back by the drive, not the back way this time, but through the hall door straight through the house and by a nearer cut.

"It seems nothing but going back," she declared aloud. "If I were superstitious I should go in, take my hat and jacket off, and not venture near the Vicarage this day. Everything combines together to prevent my getting there."

Muriel was walking up to the front door when she thus soliloquised. Suddenly it opened, and Bear bounded out, and a second after Alan followed. His delight when he saw Muriel was great. With a cry of welcome he rushed to her.

"Got rid of the fair Caroline!" he exclaimed. "Clever Murie, you must teach me your tactics. They have not brought my horse round yet; let us go and countermand it. Bear, followed me—prefers me to his mistress. What do you say to that, my—Murie?"

Muriel had nothing to say to it—nothing at least in answer to Alan's question; but she had a great deal to say about something else. With the greatest impatience she listened to all he had to say, and he had scarcely finished before she broke in abruptly—

"Hurry off, Alan, as quickly as you can—run the front way to the stables—mount your horse and be off."

Alan stared open-mouthed in the greatest astonishment. Speechless with amazement was he. Had he been a woman he might have pinched himself to see whether he was awake or dreaming.

Muriel begging him excitedly to hurry off in that cool way just when he had asserted his intention of staying, was pretty cool.

Muriel saw the effect her words had had. The ludicrous position she was altogether placed in aroused her risible faculties, and she broke out laughing.

"Go, Alan—run," she repeated, as well as she could speak.

"I positively decline to stir," he replied, in a stiff tone, "until you tell me why you wish me gone. The coast is clear as far as Caroline is concerned. Mrs. Duerdon wishes me to stay; is rather offended indeed that I did not jump at her invitation, and here are you begging me to go in the most—most, yes—I shall say it—the most impertinent manner possible, and laughing outright because I do not see the joke. Ernest is coming, I suppose, and you do not wish us to clash; I will stay and see the sport."

And Alan stood upright as if he meant what he said.

All merriment died out of Muriel. Any moment Caroline might appear on the scene, and that she knew Alan would not like. For herself she would have preferred his going to the Vicarage, but she did not wish to act contrary to his inclinations; besides, how strange it would appear to Caroline if she came and caught them together.

"Caroline is looking for you, Alan," she exclaimed, quickly. "She is even now at the stables at the back. She may discover you any moment."

Alan started as if shot, and looked round uneasily. His dread of being caught was amusing.

"That changes all, I will bolt back to the house until she has gone."

"I would go and meet her, if I were you Alan, she really is anxious to see you. A few minutes would suffice."

"Much obliged, Murie, but the anxiety is not mutual. I am as desirous of avoiding her as she is of meeting me. *Au revoir*, I'm off." And Alan turned back into the house.

"If I meet Carrie I shall tell her where you are," shouted Muriel after him.

Alan shook his fist but he was laughing.

"As you"—love me, he was going to say, but stopped himself and said—"value your peace of mind, spare me."

Muriel walked off briskly then. Bear followed Alan, and she had nothing further to detain her. She had not been long in before Caroline returned, pale and crestfallen, alone. She did not seem at all inclined to talk. In answer to all Muriel's inquiries, there was only the monosyllabic answer "Yes," or "No," until Ernest joined them, and she was ashamed to let him see her rudeness. At last in some reluctance she owned that she had seen Alan.

"You saw Alan!" repeated Muriel, in wonderment, and laughing inwardly at poor Alan's discomfiture. "Where did you see him?"

"Riding away in the distance," answered Caroline. "His horse was taken from the stable, and I saw him riding down the avenue."

"Then you did not get a chance of speaking?"

"I did not."

"How could you miss him?"

"That is a mystery to me," declared Caroline, frankly. "It really was like a game at hide and seek. I was each time in the wrong place. If I did not know Alan too well I should positively have declared he was hiding from me."

Muriel coughed, it was all she could do, she felt so uneasy. Naughty, wayward Alan, to be so mischievously boyish!

"Of course I know that he would not do such a thing," declared Caroline, looking at Muriel scrutinisingly, "and when he looked back and saw me he kissed his hand so politely."

"Looked back?" repeated Muriel," for lack of some better remark.

"Yes," replied Caroline, "Bear had been tearing after him, and he was sending him home, I think. He seemed at one moment undecided whether to follow the dog or not. Then he kissed his hand, as I said, and rode off."

Muriel could have observed, but she would not, that seeing Caroline in the distance, he had purposely gone on to avoid her. A lucky interruption came. Ernest had been to fetch his father, and returned with him. They could not have entered the room at a more opportune moment, for Muriel, straightforward and truthful, was at Caroline's mercy if she had only seen fit to put searching questions.

CHAPTER VII.

After tea was over, Caroline, with all effusion and fuss, went up to Muriel and kissed her. Muriel was never a great hand at kissing, but she was particularly awkward just then. She felt as if she were deceitful in allowing Caroline to caress her. The feeling arose from over-sensitiveness, for she could not blame herself truly for any insincerity, and she could not be responsible for Alan's delinquencies, but she had an undefined sensation that they were between them conspiring to deceive Caroline. If Muriel had only been able to read her companion better, she would have known that she had no cause to reproach herself in any way for her behaviour to Caroline, neither would she have received the kiss as a token of affection, but as one of betrayal—a Judas kiss, meant to sell the receiver of it. But Muriel was simple and trusting. If she had kissed any one, deliberately herself gone up to them of her own accord, and bestowed a salute, she would have intended that as the greatest mark of her favour. Naturally she concluded Caroline behaved in the same way. A great mistake. Caroline could kiss one cheek and pinch, bite, or scratch the other each with equal fervour.

"Will you come upstairs and look at my new

dress for the Forsters' party?" asked Caroline, taking Muriel's hand and playing with it.

There was nothing on the face of the earth that Muriel cared less for than dress, but she supposed that Mr. Mervin was tired, and that Caroline was using a little tact in getting her out of the room. Ernest, who was standing close by, saw a look on Muriel's face that bespoke a want of interest. He was very slow at reading countenances, but even he saw that.

"Do not drag Muriel upstairs," he remarked, cheerfully. "A fire is very pleasant in an evening now, is it not? Draw your chair near, and we can chat."

"Muriel shall do nothing of the kind," replied Caroline, speaking sharply. "She is my friend, and you need not interfere." Then addressing Muriel, she said, "You would rather see my dress, would you not? Ladies always feel interested in such things."

"We need not be long," answered Muriel. "One dress will only take a couple of minutes inspecting, and then we will rejoin you here. Mr. Mervin, please do not look upon me as company, but retire to your study whenever you feel inclined."

Mr. Mervin inclined his head in acknowledgment of her thoughtfulness, and Muriel left the room with Caroline.

In going upstairs a loud knock came to the front door; Muriel did not heed it; people often do not

when away from home, but Caroline stood still and listened. She thought she caught the name of Vivian, but was not sure. Ears and eyes were strained, but the conversation seemed to be carried on in a low tone. Ever inquisitive, she hurried back. Directly the servant saw her she said—

"One of the servants from Astley Park, Miss Caroline. Mrs. Duerdon is taken ill, and wishes Miss Vivian to return at once."

Caroline glanced round quickly, she saw Muriel had disappeared.

"Hush! hush!" she said, holding up a warning finger. "I will tell Miss Vivian myself. What made the Duerdons' messenger come to the front door? He might have known better."

"I am sure I do not know, miss," answered the girl carelessly. In common parlance she might have added, "And I do not care."

Caroline ran speedily after Muriel. No intention had she of delivering the message at once. She had a task to perform before Muriel went home. A stop must be put to the friendship between Alan and Muriel. Her tactics should separate them if possible. A message from Mrs. Duerdon with one of her fancied ailments did not affect Caroline at all.

"I hope you did not think me long, Muriel?" she apologized, entering her room breathless. "You found your way here all right. I will show you my dress, it is lovely. Are you going to the Forsters' party?"

Muriel bowed her head. She was scarcely girlish enough in anticipation of enjoyment.

"Is Alan going, do you know?"

"I believe so—also his mother. Sir Philip Verdun is to be there."

"Oh! is he? Is that an engagement yet, Muriel? It should have come to something by this time, if it ever means to do so. He was most attentive to her when Norah Stanhope and I were in the house."

Muriel assented, feeling small interest in the matter. "Yes, they are engaged, Carrie."

"And when is the wedding coming off?" inquired Caroline, holding her dress up to view.

"Very pretty," agreed Muriel, alluding to the dress. "The wedding comes off sometime about Christmas, or New Year. That is at least the present arrangement."

"Whatever are they waiting so long for?"

"I scarcely know, but it is at Mrs. Murray's request."

"Well, that is selfish of her," responded Caroline. "She might give some one else a chance."

Muriel opened her eyes; she did not understand what Caroline meant. Caroline saw she had not spoken plainly enough.

"She might have let Alan speak out," she observed.

"Alan!" repeated Muriel.

That was all she said, but the flush that covered her face spoke volumes.

"She might have given me one," continued Caroline, growing bolder. "I always thought well of Alan's mother, but she is turning out selfish like other people."

Muriel made no answer; she was toying rather nervously with Caroline's pretty dress, much to its detriment. Caroline's quick eyes discerned its danger, and, without seeming to notice, removed it away.

"Should you be surprised to hear that I was going to be married?" inquired Caroline.

She was annoyed that Muriel was not more inquisitive—it would have made her task easier.

Muriel laughed. She was so far perfectly ignorant of Caroline's intentions.

"I should be rather surprised," she replied quietly; "not that it would be anything to be astonished at; you receive a great deal of admiration. Only I should expect to hear some talk of Mr. Right beforehand."

"Then what will you say if I tell you that I am already engaged?" pursued Caroline excitedly. "Engaged, and have been for some time."

She walked about restlessly, and if Muriel had only noticed she could have seen that Caroline never once looked her in the face.

"Well, Carrie, I should think it very strange," replied Muriel honestly. "Living so close to each other as we do, you could not possibly be engaged without me getting to hear of it from Ernest or somebody."

"Ernest could not have told you. Alan is the only one in the secret."

"You are not clandestinely engaged, Carrie?" asked Muriel in surprise. "No, no, you are only joking. Should we go downstairs now? Your grandpapa and Mr. Ernest will be waiting."

Mr. Ernest!" echoed Caroline; "how stiff we are all at once. It is rich, considering the footing you and Ernest are on. Come, Muriel, do not be so shy. I can see a thing or two."

Muriel had not the remotest notion of what Caroline was alluding to, so she answered the part of the question she had understood.

"Perhaps I was rather absurd to call your uncle Mr. Ernest," she observed, "after having known him so many years. But all things seem to change as we grow older; and it is scarcely warrantable of me using the Christian name alone."

"Ah! ah! that is it, is it!" exclaimed Caroline, and having put away her dress, which she saw was not going to gain much attention, she unrolled her coils of long massive hair—such wealth and abundance of it.

"That is it," answered Muriel, looking admiringly at Caroline. "I had no wish to be stiff."

"I suppose not," rejoined Caroline. "But, Muriel, why not be truthful, and own your real reason. You need never be afraid of me; I shall not chaff too much."

Muriel's look of astonishment was amusing.

"I reiterate," continued Caroline, "that you

have my hearty congratulations. Oh, Muriel, do not look so dense and obtuse; you will kill me with laughing. As if I could not see as far as most people."

Muriel could only think that Caroline was alluding to Alan. Yet how could Caroline know anything about Alan before she well knew it herself?

"Ernest has spoken to me," said Caroline. "I feel sure he will make a good husband."

"Ernest has told you what?" inquired Muriel, growing more and more mystified.

"Has told me about his devotion."

"Whose devotion?" inquired Muriel, pleased at last to have something tangible to get hold of.

"You goose; Ernest has told me how much he cares for you, and he says you will come and live here. Why, Muriel, you might have confided in me."

Muriel jumped up in great indignation. She had been sitting on a chair at the foot of Caroline's bed.

"Do I understand you aright?" she said haughtily. "Are you presuming to couple my name with any one else's?"

Caroline was slightly awed, but she tried to carry it off with a laugh.

"Do not pretend to be different from other people," she exclaimed. "It is never a pleasant feeling when you find you are different to others. It is no use to disguise facts to me; I can see how you and Ernest care for each other."

"Ernest—and I—care—for—each—other," said Muriel slowly, and in broken sentences, as if she were dazed. "Explain yourself, Caroline. I must be very dense, but it is all so strange and confused in my head that I cannot disentangle ideas and set them straight. Like a tangled skein, my brains require some coaxing. I really do not take in your meaning."

"Well, you really are stupid," remarked Caroline crossly. "I spoke plainly enough; and I merely asked you why you tried to hide your engagement to Ernest from me, when I could see the ins and outs of his wooing so plainly."

At last Muriel took in Caroline's meaning, and when she really understood, there was no shock to her mind. It seemed as if she had known for such a long time all that Caroline was talking about. But it must be a joke—a joke though that required setting down with a firm hand. A great amount of dignity came to her aid as she said—

"No more of that, please Caroline; such remarks are not to my taste. Both your uncle and I are far too good friends to allow such freedom to be taken with our names. No engagement will ever take place between us, either now or at any other time; and this I should have thought you would have known."

"Poor Uncle Ernest," remarked Caroline commiseratingly. "I feel sorry for him."

"You have no right to talk so," rebuked Muriel; "I am sure Ernest would not like it. If you

mention his name again, I will run downstairs and leave you."

Caroline smiled at that threat. It was on the tip of her tongue to say, "Very excusable if you did, for then you would join Uncle Ernest, which is just what you would like;" but she restrained herself. She stood in a certain amount of awe, so far as some of Muriel's moods were concerned; and it was not her policy to offend until her shaft had driven home. So not another word was said about Ernest; though it may be here remarked that, so far as Ernest's affections were affected, Caroline was strictly truthful in all she had asserted. He was deeply in love with Muriel, and had been all his life. But if Caroline were vain her uncle was not, and little hope attended his attachment. Yet although Caroline did not intend to arouse Muriel's indignation so far as Ernest was involved, she had not the same forbearance in store in connection with Alan. She purposed cutting that friendship with a sharp knife—speedily too, 'ere another messenger arrived from Astley Park. Simpering slightly, and very affective, Caroline stood before the glass, coquetting with herself, as it were.

"Do you not admire Alan's taste, Muriel?" she inquired, glancing at her companion.

"His taste—in what way?" replied Muriel, careful ever to answer correctly. "In horses and dogs he has very good taste. I scarcely know what reply to make."

Caroline tossed her head in utter disdain.

"What a truly Muriel reply," she said. "You might, at any rate, have given him credit for taste in painting and the fine arts. But I was not asking you that, my cautious friend. I think I know him quite as well as you do, having stayed in his house pretty often. No, what I wanted your valuable opinion on was what do you think of his selection in a wife?"

Muriel looked up wonderingly. She thought she could not have heard the question aright; but seeing that some answer was expected, she said—

"I shall be better able to reply to that when he chooses some one. Time enough yet, Carrie."

"He has taken time by the forelock then. You see his chosen lady-love before you."

Muriel laughed in all glee. She thought Caroline was joking; it was too rich a thing to imagine Alan cared for Caroline after that afternoon's performance. Caroline was not pleased with the laugh, it irritated her.

"You may laugh," she remarked; "it is true enough. Alan and I are—are, well, not actually engaged, but we understand one another. It will be an engagement directly his mother gets married."

Muriel sat down. She had been standing, but was no longer able to do so. Her knees trembled, her back felt cold. She had received a shock; yet not yet did she believe it.

"You mean—to say, Caroline—that you and Alan are going to be married?" she asked incredulously.

And even as she spoke the recollection of Alan's speedy flight at sight of Caroline, his avoidance of her, and, later on, her questioning concerning Mrs. Murray. How was it that if Caroline were engaged to Alan that she did not know more about those things? Why did he not go oftener to the Vicarage? What made Caroline want her to go into the stables instead of going herself? These and a hundred more ideas flew rapidly through Muriel's brain. Thought travels with marvellous swiftness.

"I cannot credit it all," she added.

She finished by saying this aloud. In reality she was deep in thought, and was quite unconscious that she was giving audible utterance. It seemed only to her a continuation of thought. Caroline took offence immediately.

"You are very polite," she asserted harshly. "In plain language, you imply that I am speaking falsehoods. Of course, you think Alan cares for no one but yourself. Blind, Muriel, he is but making fun of you. Little you guess of the ridicule he casts on you behind your back."

"That is not Alan's way," retorted Muriel staunchly; "he always speaks out openly. He is my friend and my brother; there would be no need for him to be deceitful to me."

"Oh, would not there," said Caroline in a thorough passion, and saying more than she had intended; "he knows differently. He is perfectly sick of your ways—hunting him up and persecut

ing him with talk about Norman. He comes over to please his mother, but you need not think that he will come after she is married. No, no, that he never will. He and I know better than that."

All the time Caroline was speaking she kept her eyes turned away from Muriel. She dared not meet that truthful, searching gaze. For one brief instant Muriel's hand covered her face in the depth of agony and shame. Only for an instant; outwardly she must keep a brave front, though inwardly tumult and despair raged, and a dreadful sickly feeling took possession of her.

"What had she done," she asked herself, "that Alan should thus speak of her?" It could not be true. Once more she would resist believing one word against him. Why that very day he had called her his darling. Was he not on the point of saying words to her that should bind them together for ever? Alas for that unfortunate interruption! Could he be only deceiving her?

"Alan is too good and true to make fun of any one," she said aloud.

She wished to say more, but she could not; words would not come to her relief. And oh how sick she felt. Would that some one was there to help her!

Caroline laughed. She was pleased to see that though Muriel disowned all belief in Alan's deceit, yet that at the same time she was unhappy. Her words were beginning to take effect.

"Of course Alan is good and true," said

Caroline; "am I not the first to endorse that sentiment? Verily, it would be strange were I not."

"How, could he be true *if*—mind I say *if*, Caroline—he pretended to be my friend to my face and was an enemy behind my back, laughing and making fun of me—ridiculing my love for my dear dead brother?" Muriel's voice shook with emotion—varied emotion; but she was not going to let that stop her, when at last she could find words to express herself in. "How could he be true if he were engaged to you, or if not engaged, according to the acceptation of the term, yet legally bound to you by a private understanding? True. Why a man who did such a thing as that, and put such a different aspect on affairs, would be a sneak and a coward. Alan is no such character. There must be some mistake somewhere. I will speak out to him plainly to-morrow, and he shall explain everything clearly to me. I never can believe that Alan would make fun of me."

"Dear Alan," she said in her heart, "it cannot, cannot be," and a glow suffused her face—thrilled her being. She knew now that she loved him for all time, and until an hour ago, she had supposed that he was her noblest, best friend. Was it natural that she should so quickly credit tales to his discredit? and yet how strange it all was. But no, he had called her darling—he had avoided Caroline. She would ask him what all the mystery was. But this was the very thing that Miss Caroline feared.

Whatever happened she must put a stop to their having an explanation. Her falsehoods would all then become known, her deceit discovered, and no good would have been effected. Instead of separating them, she would have brought them closer together. So it was not likely that Caroline should stop or hesitate at such an important point. Let her once get Alan parted from Muriel, the rest would be easy; he would fall into her snares as easily as she could wish. A heart caught in the rebound she told herself. Once let him be hers irrevocably, then it mattered not how her deception all came out; Alan would forgive her for the deep love she bore him. But the next question that arose to Caroline's mind was—how could she prevent an explanation? Muriel was so unpleasantly candid and straightforward—impolitely brusque Miss Danvers termed it.

Caroline's hair was plaited up again, and she was ready to descend. Muriel arose ready to follow her downstairs. She considered that all had been said, and nothing more could be done until she questioned Alan. Caroline made a feint of going to the door, but ere she reached it she turned back.

"Sit down another moment," she said. "I want to say a few more words to you, words of friendly advice and caution."

Muriel obeyed wonderingly. It cannot be said that she felt unhappy altogether; her faith in Alan after the first shock was too great. Time

enough to be miserable when he confirmed Caroline's words. She sat down expecting some other disclosure.

A knock came at Caroline's door; she ran to it. A whispered colloquy took place, and then Caroline re-entered with a pale face and told Muriel that she was wanted; Mrs. Duerdon had been taken ill, and sent for her.

"I will go immediately," answered Muriel anxiously. "Please tell the messenger to wait."

Caroline did so, shut the door, and laid her hand on Muriel to detain her.

"Do not hurry so much," she said. "You know Mrs. Duerdon's ways; a few more minutes for my well-meant advice."

Muriel was really desirous to get off, but a few seconds more or less would not make much difference, so she stood and waited; her jacket was on, her hat ready at her side.

With strange reluctance, apparent diffidence, Caroline began.

"Muriel, do you not quite believe *all* that I have just told you," she began, "that you require an explanation from Alan?"

Muriel hesitated.

"I believe to a certain extent," she replied cautiously. "I feel sure there is some blunder somewhere. All I can feel clear about, for my mind is in a whirl, is that somehow or other you are misinformed."

"Ah! you have such faith in Alan."

"I have. The world would seem dark to me

from deceit and wickedness if he could behave so falsely as you seem to think he has done. What motive could he have? Why should he pretend to be my friend? Why should—but there, do not let us talk any farther about it."

"Do you not think then that he and I are engaged?"

The deep colour flew into Muriel's face, brought there by conflicting feelings. She was undergoing a searching catechism. How could she deliberately refuse to credit Caroline's words? A loophole opportunity presented itself.

"You said yourself, Carrie, that it was not an engagement. Why then ask me to believe more than is absolutely necessary? In the first flush of extraordinary and unexpected news people scarcely know what to believe. Do not blame me, think me sceptical nor incredulous; all is so strange. My mind is a perfect chaos; I scarcely know what I believe and what I do not."

Caroline laid her hand on Muriel's arm impressively.

"I can tell you best how much you may rely on, and how much you may not," she answered. "Question me. Alan will not tell you true. He is deliberately deceiving you with his eyes open. It is only on your account that he and I are not openly engaged at this present speaking. Believe me, Muriel, he does not like you."

"Why does he affect to do? Why make such pretences?"

"He says"—and Caroline blushed in very shame

at her own wickedness as she spoke, and hung her head as if in pity for her listener—"that you are so fond of him that he does not know how to undeceive you. Every act, every look of yours is full of trusting love, and he keeps putting off telling you that he does not like it, that the affection is not reciprocal."

"Alan actually told—you that!" gasped Muriel, almost beside herself. "He had the audacity to frame, the conceit to utter, such a base, base falsehood. Oh! let me go to him, let me go to him and upbraid him with his deceit. Oh, Caroline! why did you not tell me all this before?"

Poor Muriel shivered as she recollected how she had joined with Alan only that very afternoon in helping him to evade Caroline. She, the derided one, had fancied herself liked. If Alan really were trying to deceive her, his behaviour was only in accordance with Caroline's statements. He naturally would avoid being in the company of both at the same time. Muriel quite believed all Caroline said now. Would not nearly every one have credited it too? Who could dream of such a tissue of falsehoods plausibly told to one's very face by a girl whom they had known so many years, living in a clergyman's house, to be concocted and told with the craftiness that Caroline had used, to be all untrue. Verily Muriel's faith could not stand such a test. She had withstood the testimony of her companion for a time, but failing to discover the motive power, lost the clue,

and at last credited Caroline, even when she spoke so strongly against Alan.

Caroline saw her work was nearly done. A few more words, and Muriel would be separated from one whom she loved in all probability for ever.

"Dear, dear Muriel," she said soothingly, "forgive me for telling you now. Only the very urgency of the case is my excuse. *I* know that you did not hunt Alan up. It is only men's conceit that makes them think such things, but if I were you I would never see him again. Let him see that you have more spirit than he knows of; let him only"—

"Hush!" interrupted Muriel, with a face as pale as death. "I want no more advice. But I shall see him and tell him all that I think of him. It was so needless for him to have acted in that way. Then when I have told him I will leave him alone for ever. Nevermore shall I give him the chance to speak of me as he has done."

Caroline went white to her very lips.

"You cannot pursue that course," she said, "without betraying me. What would Alan think if he found out that I had told you about him?"

"I do not think you need mind that," answered Muriel, with the slightest curl of her lip. "He ought to feel relieved; you also, Caroline."

The bitterness of this speech escaped Caroline's notice. In fear and dread of discovery, in the deepest humiliation, she sank on her knees at Muriel's feet.

"You must promise me faithfully before you leave this room that you will never tell Alan one word of what I have said. Do promise."

But Muriel stood immovable.

"Get up, Caroline," she said, "it looks so strange to see you there. Why do you mind Alan's anger so much? Get up; I must be going."

"He will give me up; it will break my heart," wailed Caroline. "Oh, Muriel! what need for you to go and tell him? Would that I had never told you!"

"Would that you never had!" breathed Muriel, from the depth of her aching heart. "Get up, Carrie. I will not suffer one word of this disclosure to pass my lips. Will not that suffice?"

Caroline had gained her way. The promise given would she knew be religiously kept; no fear on that head. Muriel was as true as steel.

"I will never mention your name willingly to Alan again," continued Muriel. "From henceforth we shall see but little of each other."

"Let it make no difference with us," pleaded Caroline, rising and shaking her skirts out; "there is no reason why it should. I think well of you if Alan does not."

"I should not care for meeting often," replied Muriel; "neither can I think as well of you, Carrie, after what you have told me. You are equally, or at any rate nearly as much to blame as Alan. It was a betrayal of trust, an unnecessary cut to

me also. For the future, when we meet we shall never be the same. You and I can never really like each other."

No more was said. It was all so incontrovertibly true. Rivalry would not have excited Muriel's indignation, but meanness and a betrayal of friendship did. She would never have felt jealous of Caroline, nor of anybody, but she felt that such a nature as Miss Danvers' was totally opposed to her own. Instinctively she turned away from one who could so easily lower Alan in her estimation. Outwardly to the world they were friends, but never from that evening were Muriel and Caroline really the same to each other again.

CHAPTER VIII.

Muriel said "Good-night" to Mr. Mervin and Ernest just as if nothing had happened. How easy is it to put a smile on the lips when the heart is almost breaking, and how it deceives every one. Caroline even wondered whether she had been mistaken in thinking that Muriel was fond of Alan. Had she in Muriel's shoes been told the same thing which she, in all falsehood and treachery, had told Muriel, how different would have been her behaviour! Loud wailings and screamings would have rent the air, lamentations and mournings, and her grief would have been spent. Muriel, reserved and undemonstrative, would fight out her sorrow silently and alone. Not to the world would she show an aching face. No; she was trained to endurance, and she could bear it.

The messenger who had been sent was Douglas. He stood in the hall waiting patiently. Muriel gave him a smile also. He was ever a favourite of hers; he had had so much to do with Norman.

When they had reached the Vicarage gate, Muriel said—

"You may walk on to the lodge and wait for me there, Douglas. I am just going to run to my brother's grave."

"It's so dark, miss," dissented the man respect-

fully, "and Mrs. Duerdon is very ill. This is the second time I have been sent this evening. Let me go instead of you. I know fresh flowers were put on this afternoon, unless there's aught else as you want to know."

"Well, I will not go just now then," replied Muriel, but in her heart she knew that she must go there before she rested in bed that night—go and sob out some of the burden that oppressed her.

"How is it that you came twice, Douglas?"

"The missus was so anxious you should be fetched home. She had spasms bad."

"Poor Aunt Clara! But why did you not come the first time? I wish you had."

"I did come, miss, and the girl said Miss Caroline promised to give you the message."

Muriel said no more. No more questioning was needed. Douglas had been twice. Mrs. Duerdon would think her dilatory—unkind. She said something to that effect to Douglas. He walked respectfully a distance behind, but when she addressed him he came close.

"I think she blamed the people at the Vicarage, and said there was such bad management there, with a young lady for their mistress as was like a doll."

Muriel was puzzled to guess how Douglas knew all this. The inner sentiments and opinions of the house were supposed to be sacred to outsiders like Douglas. But Muriel would not ask him, it

would be encouraging gossip. However she was soon informed without. The man went on—

"Cartwright says she never heerd the missus speak worse of Miss Caroline nor better of you. Miss Muriel," she said, "was that good at"—

"But how is Mrs. Duerdon?" inquired Muriel, not feeling interested in discussing her own merits.

"She was asleep when I started, so Cartwright brought down word. But master thought as you had better be sent for."

"Asleep!" echoed Muriel, relieved, "that is all right then. I will run back for a few minutes, whilst you walk on to the Seddons and wait for me."

Douglas replied "Yes, miss," and went on. "She's going to that there blessed grave," pondered Douglas. "I know she is, but there's no need for to go. It's that dark that a many would be afeerd. I cannot say as I'd like to go myself, but Miss Muriel knows no fear where our bright Master Norman's poor body lies."

Meanwhile Muriel literally flew to the churchyard. She was determined to go there that night and leave some of her aching sorrow if she could. But few minutes could she snatch from Mrs. Duerdon, but those few she must have. She would have been stifled without them. No difficulty had she in finding the direction in which Norman's grave lay, but it puzzled her to gain the exact spot. Fearlessly and cleverly she groped about, and at last she felt the large marble cross

rearing itself boldly. One instant and she stooped down, passed her hand over the surface of the grave until she found the flowers. Those she lifted and put to her face. First she smelt them, and then she kissed them frantically.

"Norman, Norman!" she sobbed, "I am in great, great trouble. Oh, my brother! why did you leave me?" A few minutes' stillness, broken only by the sound of weeping, then Muriel got up, and feeling again for the cross, threw her arms around it. It was as if she found some consolation in clinging to it; and even in the midst of her trouble those words that our hymn-book contain, and which we so often use in church, arose to her mind—

> Nothing in my hand I bring,
> Simply to Thy cross I cling.

And then Muriel cried aloud. Talking every now and then, it soothed her. She left go at last, and pressing her forehead against the cold marble to cool her head, was just going to start home, when a cough quite close startled her. The perspiration rolled down her cheeks in fright. Not of the dead was Muriel afraid, but of the living. She scarcely knew what to do. She was afraid to run for fear of knocking against some one, and she was afraid to stand still lest whoever it was that was there should have been guided to her by the sound of her voice. The intensity of her fright decided her. She was too afraid to move. At

last her voice came to her, and she called aloud, "Who is there?" Her nerves were strung to their utmost tension, and her voice sounded loud and shrill in the solemn stillness of the churchyard, but the air carried it away, and again all was silence. No answer came to Muriel's question. She was more alarmed than ever. "Surely," she argued, "a friend would have hastened to me." But she could not fly. Her limbs were rooted to the spot. Again she called out louder than before, "Is any one there?" and oh, how she prayed for help.

"Is any one a calling?" shouted a voice in the distance, "Who is it, and whereabouts are you?"

"Just under the east window," replied Muriel, loudly. "Come quickly and help me. I am near Master Vivian's grave—the large white cross, you know."

"It's never Miss Vivian here at this time of night," said a voice, coming nearer and nearer, "yet it seems familiar like. It ain't you, Miss Vivian, is it?"

Something in the friendly tones struck on Muriel's ear. She had heard them somewhere before, but she could not recall where. Help was near, of that she felt assured, but instead of restoring her she trembled from head to foot.

"Give me yer hand, Miss Vivian. Ah! there it is, the small, little thing, fit for a queen like you. It's Bennett, you remember Bennett, him as our Master Norman was so good to. Yer recklecs

miss, you giv'd me a nice book in memory of him. Very good of you, but I did not need nothing to reckerlec him by."

Muriel remembered all at once the man breaking stones by the road. What a long time it seemed ago.

"What were you doing here, Bennett?" inquired Muriel. "It is most fortunate you came. Some one frightened me close to, and I dared not move."

"There's not a creature living as would harm you, Miss Vivian," asserted Bennett, confidently. "They all likes you for being sister to our young gent. They'd many on 'em go out of their way to do you a good turn, but bless yer heart they'd none on 'em 'ud hurt you."

"Not in Astley, perhaps, but strangers might. You have not told me yet what you came in the church-yard for?"

By this time they had rounded the church with groping and stumbling over graves. Bennett still held Muriel's hand, and she was too afraid of hurting his feelings to withdraw it.

"No," he said, slowly, "I 'an't a told yer yet what I was a doing in the church-yard, no more I 'an't. Well, let's see what was't that brought me there, I've clean forgot. Oh, aye, I knows; Mr. Wallace was a mending o' some window panes, and he left his—his what yer call it, and I come to fetch it."

"Putty," suggested Muriel.

"Yes, 'em 'ere's the name," replied Bennett.

"But you were nowhere near the windows," said Muriel, quickly. "Your voice sounded right down the other end of the church-yard."

"Aye, I'd wandered off to little 'un's grave, and I heard you call. You'd better hurry home, Miss Vivian."

Muriel felt much better. With a word of thanks to him for so opportunely coming to her aid, but without any gratuity, Muriel ran off. She would have liked to reward him, but was fearful of his taking offence at being paid for his services. She resolved, however, that he should be no sufferer for his kindness.

Bennett gazed after Muriel as she darted off. He could see her in the dim light of the lamps going down the street. He scratched his head. It was a habit of his when perplexed.

"Aye, there she goes, bless 'er," exclaimed Bennett, "a little dainty lass, eq'al to all the ladies in the land. Didn't these 'ere eyes o' mine catch sight on her going into the churchyard to-night; and didn't I say to mysel' 'Bennett, foller her. She's a going to grieve for Master Norman all i' the dark wi'out any fear.' Aye, I did, it's all gospel truth. So I follered her soft like, so as no one should harm her, bless her heart, but she was quicker nor me, and when I got close there she was a sobbing and a sobbing and a calling to Master Norman fit to break her sperrits, aye, that she wor, until I could not stand it no longer.

She's that good, that in the midst o' all her trouble she said those lines that the little children all about here learns at school. I don't go for to reckerlec it all, but I know as it ends, 'Simply to Thy cross I cling.'"

Bennett took out a rag from his pocket that did duty for a handkerchief, and wiped his forehead with it. He was standing still and no one passed near the little church-yard gate.

"When she said those 'ere lines they gave me something to think about, and I waited a bit, but when she began a crying again I felt so sorry for her that I could bear it no longer," continued Bennett, as if addressing the dark, "and I did not know what were best to do. I knew as how she would not like to think as any one heard her crying out i' that way, so in perplex I coughed, eh, my, I'd never a done it to frighten her, but she wor dreadful fritted I could tell by her voice, as I was stealing off. You see I wanted to make her think as I'd never hurd her; and then when she called the second time I'd got far enough to answer her. It worn't quick work a creeping along falling among those graves, but I did not think she heard me a going. Law sakes, too, when she asked in what I'd been a doing i' the church-yard, I wor nearly caught. Pretty creetur, how grateful she wor when arter all I was the one that fritted her, on'y she did not know it, and I must never tell for she'd not like to be told as Bennett caught her crying and a sobbing i' the church-yard at nine

o'clock and later on a dark night. I cannot think what's come to the moon and stars," he remarked presently, walking on. "I suppose like wukking folk they gets tired betimes and goes to bed."

Bennett's unwillingness to hurt Muriel's feelings might surely teach many better-educated people a salutary lesson. True refinement was his, poor and ill-bred as he was. Pure good feeling prompted him to follow the little lady, as he termed her. No curiosity nor any other motive influenced him; all was out of kindness. The tact and caution he displayed in striving to spare her wounded feelings were never guessed at by Muriel, but a few days later she called at his cottage and left a nice little present with his wife. In a few days—yes, much happened to Muriel in those few days—before Bennett got his reward, but more of this presently. Sometimes in a short time,—one single day, it may be,—events crowd thickly together, much happiness or much sorrow to mark the flight of time. Which cup was it that Muriel was going to hold to her lips?

CHAPTER IX.

Mrs. Duerdon was still asleep when Muriel reached home, neither did she awake before the household retired for the night. The attack of spasms had been severe and sudden. Exhausted and worn after the pain, sleep was the best medicine. Muriel might as well have not been fetched so far as Mrs. Duerdon was concerned. But many a time afterwards Muriel declared that, had she had to stay at the Vicarage and join in with their social chat all the evening, she should have broken down completely. Mrs. Duerdon's illness, as far as Muriel was to be considered, was providential. The visit to Norman's last earthly resting-place, once that her fright was over, did her good; composed and quieted her. She could not help feeling after a visit there that a time should come when she would lay sorrow and grief aside like an old garment, ragged and worn. She would throw this earthly tabernacle off; the outer garb which but few would desire to keep for ever. Strange to say Muriel fell asleep directly she got into bed. No anxious thoughts disturbed her. The old faith in Alan had revived. She had not been his friend so many years without knowing his character pretty well, and all that she had hitherto seen of him was so totally opposed to

Caroline's account, that she could do nothing but wonder directly she had left the grave. It was as if Norman's spirit had entered into her there, opened her eyes and shown her somewhat of the true state of things. She never suspected Caroline was making things up to please herself, concocting and hatching falsehoods matchless in their wickedness, but she did hope that there was some misunderstanding somewhere—that it would all turn out right in the end. And though she awaked with a heavy load on her heart, it was some little time before she could remember the cause of her grief. It rushed across her suddenly—overwhelmingly. Viewed at from all points, her position was a bad one. Pride pressed hard, but love and friendship were greater to withstand. Muriel's lips were sealed to Alan so far as Caroline's disclosure was concerned; it placed her awkwardly. She could not become distant to him without having the satisfaction of explaining her altered demeanour if asked for it. So she wisely resolved to try and be the same, to keep a watchful eye on all her doings, so that not the most captious could find a flaw in her manner towards him. Ever had she been most diffident and ladylike, that she well knew. Not her severest judge could honestly and truthfully accuse her of forwardness, or of, as Caroline had expressed it, "of hunting Alan up." It was so totally opposite to Muriel's disposition. Several times in the morning, and for a long time each visit, did Muriel go

to Mrs. Duerdon in her bedroom. That lady was quite recovered again, but it pleased her to remain an invalid as long as she could to keep people waiting on and running about for her, and in every way creating a fuss. Muriel did not mind it. She expected Alan to come and see her according to his promise, and she was somewhat anxious in one way to meet him again, to look at his face, read his countenance, and otherwise study him to see if it could possibly be true that he was deceitful. But down, deep, deep in her heart, stowed away, was a great love, and that love demanded, though Muriel knew it not, another sight of the beloved one to feast her eyes upon, not to search scrutinizingly, as she supposed. Each tap at the bedroom door, each ring at the front bell, and Muriel's heart fluttered in expectation. At last she felt instinctively that he had come. She went on to the large landing to see if she could catch a glimpse of him without being seen. Then she heard his voice, and she rushed down the long corridor to her bedroom; to smooth her hair and arrange her cuffs was the work of an instant; but in that short time she found room to blame herself.

"Caroline was right," she thought, "what is this but hunting him up? Yet I never did this before. Never do I remember being so anxious to see him and hear his voice. What is the matter with me? I will punish myself by going back into Mrs. Duerdon's room, and sitting there quietly until I am summoned."

And she did so, and each minute seemed an hour. At length a servant came to her and said, "Mr. Murray called, miss, but I told him you were busy attending on Mrs. Duerdon, and he replied that he would call again."

All the blood in Muriel's body flew into her face. Her heart sank and she sat speechless. Any other time she would have put questions. She longed to know if he were going to call that day or would she have to wait another night through, but she did not like to speak. Luckily for her Mrs. Duerdon was not equally reticent.

"You had no right to say Miss Vivian was busy," she said, angrily, "unless you received orders to do so. We are always at home to Mr. Murray; remember this for the future. When he comes so far it is very rude to refuse to see him. Where was Mr. Duerdon?"

"Out in the garden, ma'am, and so the butler told him, but he came into the breakfast-room where I was dusting, hoping to see Miss Muriel. He offered to go of his own accord, ma'am, and was very sorry to hear you were ill."

A sop to Cerberus, and Cerberus swallowed it.

"You did not manage so badly then," replied Mrs. Duerdon approvingly.

"No, ma'am, and I offered to fetch Miss Muriel, but he proposed of his own accord going to the Vicarage, and coming again a little bit later."

"Going to the Vicarage!" exclaimed Muriel. "Did he say that?"

"Why Muriel, child, how white you have gone!" observed Mrs. Duerdon, amazed. "You speak as though Alan had no right to go to the Vicarage. I wish you could see yourself."

Muriel bowed her head. A great anguish had taken hold of her. She began to think Caroline had been right. No answer came from her parted lips.

"Of course you will see, ma'am," observed the maidservant resentfully, "that I did my best. I have nothing to do with answering the doors. If a gentleman walks into the very room where I am working, comes of his own accord without your leave or by your leave, you can only answer his questions."

"And leave the room," put in Mrs. Duerdon. "Certainly. I am not blaming you. It is all right if Mr. Murray is returning."

Muriel was surprised that Mrs. Duerdon suffered the maid to speak so freely, but it mattered little, and she escaped to her own chamber whilst the colloquy was going on. She dared not stay any longer for fear of betraying herself altogether. She was miserable. Alan had gone to the Vicarage. Why could he go this morning when he could not go last night? Was it merely because she was out of the way?

A quarter of an hour or so spent in such soliloquies, and a better frame of mind took possession of Muriel. The recollection of the years in which she had enjoyed Alan's friendship, years in which

he had always proved himself loyal, staunch, and true, and oh, such a friend! she told herself. She could not forget his kind thoughtfulness which always surrounded her, his careful attention to each want, his studied regard for her happiness. Ever unselfish and amiable to her, and oh! so companionable. Was she to turn away from him at the first breath of calumny, the first whisper to his discredit? Should she like a veritable stranger believe the only tale that she had ever heard against him? Time after time her ears had been filled with news of his goodness, generosity, and bravery—tales which had been most acceptable. Were they all to be upset at one blast of wind? But then, look at the authority of the announcer. Caroline dared not tell her false, simply dared not. And so all the morning Muriel's thoughts went on, sometimes veering to Alan, sometimes veering from, and yet with a deep love underlying all.

How poor Muriel's heart was torn! It was, perhaps, fortunate for her that she was wanted in every direction. Mrs. Duerdon, full of freaks, first wanted one thing and then another. At one time Muriel must read to her. Muriel would gladly have read by the hour, and stilled her busy thoughts, but there was a great difficulty about what book she was to read.

"Shall I go on where I left off?" inquired she, taking up the fashionable novel from Mudie's, "or have you been reading to yourself?"

"As if I had been able," retorted Mrs. Duerdon in displeasure. "You are very unfeeling, Muriel. I hope you will have one of these attacks some day, just a short one to feel what it is like. You will feel a little compassion for others then."

Muriel smiled, oh so wearily. She thought if she did not know what spasms of the body were, that she had a pretty correct idea of what were spasms of the mind. With a deep-drawn breath that seemed to shake her from its strength she answered—

"I am truly sorry for you, Aunt Clara, in all your aches and pains. Do not misunderstand me. My unexpressed sympathy is more a want of manner than absence of heart. If you remember, as a child I was very undemonstrative."

Mrs. Duerdon raised herself partly, and tried to move her pillow, but like all idle people who give themselves the most pains she had not moved enough, and was lying on it. Pulling and pulling she could not succeed, for she was, as it were, warring against herself. Muriel saw her dilemma, and easily set matters straight.

"My handkerchief," demanded Mrs. Duerdon in exhausted tones. "Where is Cartwright?"

"I thought you told her to go away, and not come again until you sent for her, Aunt Clara."

"Ah, so I did," assented Mrs. Duerdon, wiping her brow. "Yes, Muriel, you are right about saying you were an undemonstrative child. You

really were a horrid little thing, with the nastiest temper, always flying out in the most unexpected way."

"You misunderstood me so," declared Muriel apologetically.

"And there was Norman," pursued Mrs. Duerdon, unheeding the interruption, "the sweetest little fellow that ever any one set eyes on. It was impossible to snub him or set him down. He was so loving and amiable, so attractive in all his childish ways."

"Dear, dear Norman!" exclaimed Muriel with a burst of sorrow. "How often I wish I had died instead of him! He was so good, so fit to die, and yet so well able to have made his way in the world. Would that I had died for him! Dear Norman!"

"Of course it would have been better," asserted Mrs. Duerdon equably, "and we all felt it so at the time. But my experience shows me that things generally do go the contrary way to what we wish. However, it's no good crying over spilled milk; you are improved, vastly improved, and we cannot alter things now. All our regrets will never put you in Norman's place, nor Norman in yours."

Muriel's head was bowed on the bedclothes.

"No, never," she rejoined. "If they could Norman and I would change places. He has rest and peace and"—

"Pray what have you?" demanded Mrs. Duer-

don. "Have not you got all those? Muriel, you are never satisfied. Lift your head up, and don't be moping there instead of cheering me. I do not care for my book this morning. Fetch the *Queen*, and read that aloud."

And as Muriel went for it Mrs. Duerdon said—

"If she had been like anybody else she would have thought of that paper. I always have to recollect everything."

Muriel returned with a pile of newspapers. She laid them on a chair at the foot of the bed.

"What have you brought all those for?" demanded Mrs. Duerdon fretfully. "You know very well, Muriel, how weak I am. I think after all a chapter in the Bible will suit me best, and then a sleep."

"Mr. Duerdon sent you all the papers, Aunt Clara. He thought you might like to see them."

"Where is he?"

"In the dining-room," replied Muriel, taking up a Bible, and proceeding to find a suitable portion.

"Is he not coming to see after me?"

"Not just yet, Aunt Clara," answered Muriel, soothingly; "he is very busy. He wanted me to go and help him. He is very sorry he missed Alan."

"Well, cannot he send to the Vicarage for him?"

"Scarcely," replied Muriel, with a sigh.

"You could go for him!" exclaimed Mrs. Duerdon, as if a sudden thought had struck her. "Ring

for Cartwright; she can read well enough to please me; well enough in the Bible, that is; there are no difficult words."

"Oh, Aunt Clara!" murmured Muriel, in deprecation.

"What are you oh-ing me about?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, in no way pleased. "I say what I mean. Any one can read well enough in the Bible. There are only those fearful names, and they may just as well be missed. I always tell Cartwright to never mind them."

The faintest smile rose to Muriel's lips.

"Why do you choose chapters with names in, Aunt Clara? The nicest part for us to read for comfort is the New Testament, and there you need"—

"Do not bother so, Muriel," retorted Mrs. Duerdon, impatiently. "I like the historical parts best. They are most interesting. Why do you not ring?"

"Because I am not going to fetch—I am not going to the Vicarage."

"You—are—not going—to fetch—Alan," repeated Mrs. Duerdon, slowly.

And, raising herself in bed, she stared Muriel full in the face. Muriel coloured, but she answered—

"No, I cannot go after Alan. Please do not ask me, Aunt Clara."

"Yet you have often done it?"

"Only at your bidding, Aunt Clara."

"This is at my bidding."

"True; but I cannot do it this time. Alan will come when he wishes."

"You went and fetched him away from the organ last Sunday, when he was chatting with Caroline."

"Because you sent me. You said the carriage could wait no longer."

"One of the servants might have gone then."

"They might, truly, Aunt Clara; but you never sent one. I concluded that the coachman only was there, for often Parkyn walks on Sunday."

"You did think about it, then?"

"A thought just crossed my mind for a moment, nothing more. You so often send me on messages."

"Of course I do; yet you decline to go now."

"I would prefer not going, Aunt Clara."

A moment's pause.

"You have refused, Alan, then. Your white face and dejected looks are accounted for."

Muriel's head went up.

"I do not understand you," she remarked, coldly.

"I spoke plainly enough. You have declined the honour of Mr. Murray's hand, his heart, and his vast possessions."

"Aunt Clara, you speak prematurely; Mr. Murray has not offered me his hand. Should I read to you now?"

"Oh, he has never spoken—has he not?" ejaculated Mrs. Duerdon, lying down again.

"Phew! that is it. Then, Muriel, you have lost him. He *never*, mind me, will propose now—never. You have let the opportunity slip. That flirting, designing Caroline will get him. You silly girl, how dense you have been. You may give up all thought of him."

A wail from Muriel. She had not needed this torture. Seeing some reply was expected she said—

"Yes, Aunt Clara."

"But I say no," replied Mrs. Duerdon, emphatically. "You had the game in your hand, and lost. You threw away your trump card. Oh, blind, blind Muriel. Now you have one of the most forward, designing girls pitted against you; a girl with a lovely face, but without a single principle. How badly you have managed your affairs."

Muriel might have replied, "Only for your coming and interrupting me the other day—only yesterday afternoon, but it seemed so long since—I should have known what Alan's intentions were. He spoke to me most endearingly, and roused my heart to a knowledge of its possessor, only to leave it stricken, wounded. But for you I might have known whether he were true or false." But nothing of this escaped Muriel's lips. As miserable as she felt, there was still the hope of seeing Alan in the afternoon, and, then, though *she* might not speak out openly, perhaps *he* would.

"What ever are you thinking of, Muriel," inquired Mrs. Duerdon. "Are you deliberating

whether you should go to the Vicarage, or whether the moon is made of green sea, or what. You seem perfectly lost."

"I beg your pardon," replied Muriel, aroused. "Should I read to you now? I have found the place."

"I should like to know who could listen to reading," retorted Mrs. Duerdon, aggrievedly, "when everything is going wrong. You had the best match for miles around at your feet, I *saw it*, and by some mismanagement you have lost him."

"May I inquire how you know that, Aunt Clara?" demanded Muriel, roused into sudden temper.

"Oh, I do not know it; but I guess it, and my instincts are seldom wrong. Your unhappy looks, and Alan's going to the Vicarage. Then Caroline's manner with him. I shall be truly glad if I am mistaken. But something tells me he never will propose to you now."

"I do not think he ever will. Oh, Aunt Clara, what will you do! May I read, or is there anything else?"

"You can ring for Cartwright, and leave me. You are too dull for anything, Muriel. Few girls might have been as happy as you."

"Do not fidget about me," said Muriel, with forced spirits. "There is not the least occasion, thank you."

And when Cartwright answered the bell she left the room.

CHAPTER X.

In the meantime Alan had gone to the Vicarage. Full of joy and happiness was his heart, for was he not going that very day to ask Muriel to become his own? Not only that, but was there not every reason to hope, from her manner of the day before, that he would be accepted? Precious Muriel; his own sweet pearl. He felt so elated that he scarcely knew how to contain his exultation. How good she was, too, waiting so kindly on Mrs. Duerdon. Truly that lady had been blessed in her intercourse with "Millicent's children." Alan could only think fondly of them both. Rarely—never—had two such guileless, gentle, brave spirits, as they two, been born into the world.

With no particular motive did Alan wander off to the Vicarage. Some time had to be whiled away ere he could disturb his lady-love. Where could he better spend it than by going to the Vicarage and seeing the aged Vicar, who was failing fast?

Since yesterday afternoon Alan had learnt to be rather ashamed of his persistent avoidance of Caroline. It was cowardly behaviour after his recent encouragement. Nay, hardly that—permission would be better—after his allowance of

her flatteries. He had permitted them without discouragement, until he saw they were going too far, and then, man-like, instead of showing decidedly that they were objectionable to him, he tried to withdraw altogether. A night's meditation, however, had shown Alan that this was foolish. Caroline must be met on her own ground. So when she met him eagerly with drooped eyelids and affected modesty, he spoke out bravely, merely touching her hand.

"Where is your grandpapa? I came to see him and Ernest."

Caroline's affectation was gone in an instant; she was all reality.

"Grandpapa has given word that no one is to disturb him until twelve o'clock or after. He dozes all his time away," observed Caroline parenthetically. "But it is barely eleven yet; we can have a nice little chat."

"Thanks, I cannot stay; Muriel is expecting me. I promised to be with her early this morning."

Alan thought this announcement calculated to open Caroline's eyes. He little knew the turmoil and commotion that was going on in her breast at mention of the name; a conscience that would not rest was gnawing away. Caroline had never done a great wrong before, and therefore it upset her. But bad as she felt, there was no repentance in the feeling—only a fear of being found out. And if Alan and Muriel met, what might not be revealed?

True, Muriel had given her promise, and a promise with her was inviolate ; but what might not Alan suspect from her manner and come to her (Caroline) for explanation? One wrong step involves another. Having deceived Muriel, there was no course for Caroline, without complete retraction, but to deceive Alan also. Alas ! one lie claims another. And so Caroline found it ; but having once descended to the baseness of falsehood, she never hesitated at going lower and lower. Immediately Alan declared that he was going to see Muriel, thoughts like the above flashed through her brain, and she said—

"Are you going to see Muriel ? Ernest has gone, I believe, to see her."

Ernest was out visiting in the parish, and Caroline knew it was most highly improbable that Alan and he would meet. Moreover, Ernest generally spent the whole of the morning out when once he started, so that she did not fear his returning until dinner time; Alan would be gone from the house long before that. An easy place for a falsehood.

"Gone to see Muriel," repeated Alan, rather suspiciously. He was always jealous of Ernest but he supposed it was merely a matter of taking her music back, or something she might have forgotten the night before ; and Ernest, glad of an excuse, had availed himself of it. "If both your grandpapa and uncle are engaged, I may as well return. I shall, in all probability, find Ernest at the Park."

"And spoil sport?" asked Caroline significantly, with a peculiar upraising of the eyebrows, as much as to say how astonished she was at his behaviour. "Will you not sit down, Alan?"

"No, I cannot stay, as I before said. But what do you mean by your strange remark?" questioned Alan sternly.

Caroline had the grace to glance down. Even she, deceitful as she was, had not the shame to brazen her treachery out. Things had come to a strange pass; more deceit was required—more lies to carry on her game. Did she regret her past conduct? Not at all; Alan must be hers. The first step was to separate him from Muriel. She toyed with a piece of lacework that was in her hand.

"Do not—be cross with me, Alan," she pleaded, putting on her most winning smile; "I have not done anything to offend you, have I? We need not talk about Ernest and Muriel any more, but leave them to settle their own affairs."

"I am not offended with you, Carrie; put yourself out of the conversation," answered Alan hastily. "But what is it that you wish to imply? Do you mean that they are attached to each other, or what do"—

"Please do not ask *me*, Alan; ask somebody else," interrupted Caroline, but speaking in strange reluctance. "*I* would not be the one to open your eyes; I *dare* not."

And Caroline actually squeezed two large tears

which filled her eyes. She was a splendid actress. Alan, in the midst of his perplexity and doubt, felt pity for her. Man-like, he could not bear tears.

"Do not be afraid, Carrie, I shall not be angry," he answered gently. "Is your uncle fond of Muriel, or is"— but he could get no farther, the words stuck in his throat. He could not say, "Or does Muriel love your uncle?"

The very thought was like dashing a sparkling glass of nectar away from his lips just as he was about to drink it; and not only that, but placing a dose of cold icy water in its place, that chilled his very marrow.

"You will tell of me if I mention anything."

Alan's proudest, haughtiest manner, that would have repelled most people, was put on. It daunted Caroline even; but there was no turning back in the dangerous game she was playing, no time for nerves and hesitation. Yet she stammered in spite of herself—

"I was afraid Uncle Ernest would not care for me to talk about his affairs, or else I"—

"I see," answered Alan quickly, all his late happiness dying away; "Ernest does not wish me to know, and—Muriel"—

"Returns his affection, I fully believe."

Silence reigned; not another word was spoken. Alan went through months of misery in those few moments—years indeed to him. Never before in his happy life had he known such a trouble. But

he roused himself; Caroline was watching him. The contemplation of his sorrow could not be flattering to her. Suppose she had done it all for nothing. But no, if she could not have Alan Muriel should not if she could help it.

"I will say good-morning, Carrie," observed Alan, trying to smile; "and, in all probability, it will not only be good-morning, but good-bye. I too cared for Muriel. I cannot—stay—and see her—love for another. I—will not destroy"—

But there Alan broke down. He had spoken with difficulty all the time.

"Oh, Alan," said Caroline, "you care for Muriel. Do not say so. Think of others—of—of another."

Caroline's meaning was too plain. For a minute Alan looked bewildered. He understood well enough what she would say, but he was too gentlemanly to let her see that he did. Well assumed, however, as was his denseness, it did not blind Caroline. She clenched her teeth. Oh to what depths of degradation had she allowed her love for Alan to draw her! Never mind, she had parted Muriel and he. But how would matters be when Alan found out her deception? She feared as well as loved him. And find it out he must, unless she proved her words good. The best thing to be done next was to encourage Alan's going away, and then, when the coast was clear, to get Ernest and Muriel as much together as she could, in hopes of their becoming attached to each other.

"I will now say good-bye, Miss Caroline," said Alan, holding out his hand and trying to speak gaily; "there are worse troubles than mine at sea."

"I should think there are. Did you say you were going abroad, Alan?"

"Very probably I may; I scarcely know where I shall go. One thing alone is certain, I shall never remain and witness Muriel happy with some one else. You see I make no secret of my love; every one knew of it, I fancy."

When he had gone Caroline did not know what to do with herself. It is easier to slide into error than climb out, and she had slidden down easily enough. She gave no thought to rectifying her wickedness. Had she gone at once and owned all, but little harm would have been done, and she would have been forgiven. But alas! she never thought of that. All that grieved her was the certainty that she would never be Alan's wife; it was perplexing, distressing, maddening. All her guilt was nearly sure to be exposed—laid bare sooner or later; and she would be none the better —only she had separated Muriel and Alan. That thought comforted her. Strange are the workings of the human heart. Jealousy was at the root of Caroline's sin; it was stronger even than love. The reader must not think too badly of Caroline, she was not all bad. Like the rest of us, there was a mixture of good and evil in her nature. But alas! with her the good was weak just then—the

evil predominant. Perhaps in some circumstance in our lives, even the very best of us may have been surprised at their capacity for evil. Caroline might never have known how she could sin had she not become jealous of Muriel. She could be amiable, kind, loving—everything that is outwardly lovable ; but inside the heart were labyrinths that she had been unconscious of. These were trodden when she wished to separate two true hearts. Naturally, perhaps Caroline's nature was weak. Vanity, her besetting sin, arose from delight in her pretty face. Had she taken the gift of beauty in the right way—glad of instead of vain of it—how gifted might she not have been.

Alan left her presence in a perfect turmoil of unrest, a fever of jealousy and despair tugging at his breast. He never doubted Caroline's words—they so coincided with his former fears. There was only one more thing to be done, to face her—read in her expressive countenance her love for another, and then bid her a long farewell. He would travel in many lands, put oceans between them; and yet as he thought of it all he groaned aloud. What was distance to his spirit ? Could it not span miles and miles, aye, thousands of miles, in a second of time; and it would never be parted from Muriel, it never could. He loved her for time and for eternity. What was he to do ? How could he bear it ?

With his heavy heart aching with its new burden

he wandered into the church-yard; not yet could he meet Muriel. Through the very same little gate that she had entered last night he entered. Strange that both sought the same haven of refuge in their sorrow—the link that bound them together. But it was broad daylight now, and Muriel had had the protecting cloak of darkness, shielding her from the gaze of every eye. Alan had no such shield. He walked to the grave with bent head, bowed as one seeking the last home of one but recently lost. Norman's grave, however was not new—moss-grown and flowers growing out of it, as well as those laid on it, it might have been taken for years older than it was. But there was the date, 1863, and the day of the month, April 7; no one could mistake how long the gentle boy had been laid there. Alan had no need to look at the inscription; he knew it off well enough by heart. Many times, countless—out of number had he and Muriel sat there. How he longed for her now. The tall marble cross stood erect, stately. Oh, that it could have spoken, and told of the arms thrown round it last night in desolation—of the sorrow-stricken cry that rent the air—of the wild appeal to Norman! Alan's sorrow would have been turned into joy—Muriel would no longer have had occasion to grieve. But alas! the monument remained the same in calm cold immobility—it could tell no tales beyond the one sad tale that was written on it of Norman's early death. Alan stooped down and touched the flowers

lightly with his fingers. One small white aster he plucked—a memento of Norman that; not of Muriel.

"Would that he had lived," groaned Alan, with an inward sob; "things would have been different then. Muriel might not have grown daily into my heart as she has done, or else Norman might have shown her sooner how hard I was trying to win my pretty pearl, my pure Muriel."

No blame did he cast to her that she preferred Ernest to him; it was merely a matter of taste. Ninety-nine girls out of a hundred he knew would choose the other way. But then Muriel was the hundredth. She was ever original, unique, different to anybody else; and that was one of the reasons he cared for her.

Casting a lingering glance at the grave, Alan strayed away all over the church-yard. He cared not whither he went so that he whiled away the time that hung so heavily on his hands. The church clock struck two before he left the church-yard. He had, however, not been walking all the time; for over an hour he had been sitting down under the shelter of the Vicarage wall. Caroline little thought how near he was to her just then. But directly the clock struck he jumped up. Cramped and chilled was he; but that he scarcely noticed—his mind was in a worse state than his body. However, it had to be borne, and he was a man, and equal to bearing everything, even to death itself. One more glance at Norman's last

earthly resting place before he left it for a long, long time.

"Rather would I that my darling was laid there," he exclaimed, "a thousand times rather than that she should become the wife of another, and that other Ernest—the duffer."

Alan was scarcely conscious of the energy with which he spoke, but he gave a great start on going through the little gate to meet Ernest himself face to face. It was a most unexpected contretemps, and Alan was utterly unprepared for it. If there was a man on the whole globe whom Alan, good-tempered, generous Alan, cordially hated just then, it was the said Ernest—the fortunate possessor, so Alan thought, of Muriel's affections. Ernest held out his hand heartily; Alan was a great favourite of his. He began—

"I am just to find the whereabouts of Widow"—

But Alan brushed by him without a word, and with a hard stare down the village street, walked away as if Ernest had been an entire stranger to him. It was a most unequivocal and decided cut. Ernest stood open-mouthed gazing after him; he took his spectacles off and rubbed his eyes, as if doubting whether he saw aright. Then, stroking his long thick beard, pursued his way. Always dense and never particularly sensitive or ready to take a slight, Ernest concluded Alan really had not seen him.

"The queerest thing of all was," he declared, stroking his beard again in deliberation, "he

looked at, positively looked me in the face; but I suppose he was thinking of something else. I always considered Alan the sharpest, quickest man I ever knew; but he was not over-sharp just now."

And Alan's ponderings were of Ernest.

"The stupid, smiling donkey," declared Alan to himself irritably, striding down the street, "grinning triumphantly at me through those spectacles as if I were going to shake the hand in a friendly grasp—the hand that has robbed me of a greater treasure far than life itself. He has met the wrong customer this time."

Instead of walking through the hall door, which stood wide open, although September was nearly gone, Alan rang the bell. Mr. Duerdon popped his head through one of the numerous doors that lined the hall and as quickly withdrew it, almost quicker than thought; for when he remembered that it was Alan whom he had seen, he came out and welcomed him.

"Had much sport this month, Alan?" he inquired. "Killed many braces?"

"Pretty fair," rejoined Alan; "I have not gone in for shooting largely."

"Waiting for the pheasants I suppose?" continued Mr. Duerdon, leading the way to the drawing-room.

"I scarcely know," replied Alan, stopping to put his hat on the stand; "my plans are rather unsettled. Probably, before the month is out, I may go abroad."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Duerdon, in consternation; "very sudden, is it not? Very sudden that arrangement?"

"Slightly so," answered Alan, with a wan smile. "But I am an idle man you see—my time is my own, to squander as I like. I think I shall travel for a bit; it is well to cultivate one's mind."

"Before settling down, eh?"

Alan made no answer. They had been standing outside the door; Mr. Duerdon opened it, and they walked in. Mrs. Duerdon, who had risen directly after her conversation with Muriel, came forward with alacrity to welcome Alan. But he scarcely noticed her greeting; it was another whom he had come to see. Muriel had gone behind Mrs. Duerdon in a strange fit of shyness. She longed to be with Alan, to study him, and to see if he looked as if he really cared for Caroline; but now that the time had come she wished that the earth would open and swallow her up, so great was her dread that it was all true. One glance at Muriel's shrinking figure and downcast face was enough for Alan; it seemed to give confirmation to his worst fears. He scarcely touched the tips of her fingers, and with a heavily suppressed sigh, Muriel sat down a long way from him. Like Alan, her spirits had sunk to zero. There was no longer any room for hope—he loved Caroline. It was a curious case of cross-purposes.

A few minutes of conversation, and Mrs. Duerdon was getting up to leave the room.

"Do not go at present," begged Alan; "not at least," he hastened to add, seeing her look of surprise, "until I have bidden you farewell."

The look of astonishment with which both hearers greeted this announcement was indescribable. It seemed to take away their breath.

"I was only going to speak to my husband," declared Mrs. Duerdon, sinking back into an easy chair.

"Let me go, Aunt Clara," pleaded Muriel, with a pale face, glad of any excuse that would make a way of escape.

"I think Mr. Duerdon will be in shortly. He is aware of my proposed intention of going abroad."

But Muriel had gone. She met Mr. Duerdon just outside the drawing-room door.

"Aunt Clara was coming to fetch you," she remarked. "Are you going in there?"—pointing with her thumb to the drawing-room.

"I am; let me take your arm and we can return together."

But Muriel shrank away.

"I am not returning just yet," she replied. "Please call me down before Alan goes."

Mr. Duerdon was puzzled by Muriel's manner, her pale face, and Alan's abrupt departure.

"There is something wrong," he decided to himself. However, he said nothing more, but joined his wife and Alan.

CHAPTER XI.

Mrs. Duerdon was not long in following Muriel's example, devoutly trusting that Mr. Duerdon would follow her example, so that Muriel might be sent back, and the young people be enabled to patch up a speedy reconciliation. By that time it dawned on Mrs. Duerdon's mind that Alan and Muriel must have fallen out, though how or why they should have done so was a perfect mystery to her.

The two gentlemen were no sooner left alone, than Mr. Duerdon, without any preamble, asked what was vexing Muriel. Alan's haughtiest manner was put on.

"You must ask her that question, and not me," replied he. "Vexed; you are mistaken, Mr. Duerdon. She is very pleased."

Muriel's haggard face and tear-stained cheek rose to Mr. Duerdon's recollection. For Muriel had had a bitter cry that morning; and Alan must have noticed it had he looked her in the face.

"She could hardly be pleased at your going away," retorted he. "Now, Alan, the look with which Muriel greeted me just now was certainly not a happy one. Her eyes swollen with crying, and"—

"She cannot have been crying since I came, and whatever distressed her before had nothing to do

with me. Tears of joy as well as tears of sorrow, we are told, are shed. Muriel is happy enough. Ask Ernest Mervin; he was here this morning."

"Ernest here; I think not," responded Mr. Duerdon.

"Oh, but he was. I met him coming from here."

"You did; that then is proof positive. But no one told me that he had been. He rarely calls; they might have informed me."

"He has been for certain," reasserted Alan, so confident did he feel that he had encountered Ernest, on his return journey home, near the church-yard; the truth being that Ernest had had his dinner since his morning's visiting in the parish, and was going to inquire into some one's tombstone, about which there had been a dispute, when he and Alan met.

"Well, Ernest's coming would not interest Muriel much," affirmed Mr. Duerdon. But whilst he spoke it crossed his mind that perhaps his wife had been in one of her cranky moods, as he termed them, and that she had so vented her temper on Muriel as to make the young girl unhappy. Such an event was not of frequent occurrence latterly, but still little outbreaks happened at times. Perhaps there had been one; it would be as well to inquire no further. "Ernest is like his father in one point—he seldom comes to our house."

"Oh, you will doubtless have him oftener in future," said Alan, assuming as indifferent an air as he could, and buttoning up his coat.

"You are not going," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon; "you will stay dinner surely—the night if you can. And where is it you are off too, Alan? and with whom? Is there a party of you?"

"I go alone," replied Alan. "That is all that is at present fixed. I neither know where I am going nor for how long; neither do I exactly ken the day of my departure. It may be to-morrow, or not for a week."

"Then," said Mr. Duerdon, quite relieved, "we need be in no hurry to shake hands, and say that dreadful word farewell—the hardest word in the dictionary. I will leave you, and send Muriel to you."

"Do please; nevertheless, I should like to say good-bye before you leave the room; for however long it may be before I start from Stonecourt, I shall not trouble Astley Park with my presence again; not, at any rate, until after my return from abroad."

Alan finished buttoning up his coat and stood up. Mr. Duerdon had started for the door, but he stopped.

"Alan," he said, "there is something wrong. Explain it to me. I am all in the dark. We—Muriel has offended; my young friend tell me what it all is."

"There is nothing to explain," replied Alan, his handsome face clouded, moody, uncompromising. "No one has offended me."

Mr. Duerdon went up to the young man, concern written legibly on his countenance.

"My wife and I have done nothing, I feel sure," he said, "we are ever pleased to see you. But Muriel, has she done anything? Tell me; there is a mystery in you two being separated thus, you who are always together. Alan, she has—excuse me--she has never rejected you—but no—else why her tears?" And the more Mr. Duerdon pondered the more he was puzzled.

"Rejected me!" laughed Alan, scornfully. "Oh, please Mr. Duerdon fetch her to bid me *au revoir*."

"One moment, Alan; forgive my importunity, but I must say a few words. Unfortunately, like a man groping in the dark, I cannot tell what I am about. Only one thing is clear, you and Muriel have had a misunderstanding."

"Miss Vivian and I have not had one wrong word," answered Alan, coldly. "We were never farther from quarrelling. I decline to discuss Miss Vivian's affairs with any one."

"Why has she gone away, then?"

"She herself could answer that question best. If she does not care to see me again pray make my adieux, and say I quite understand."

Mr. Duerdon could have danced in very perplexity.

"Do not feel uneasy on my account," said Alan, forcing a laugh. "I am all right, I assure you."

"I was not feeling uneasy for you," replied Mr.

Duerdon, candidly. "The face of Muriel arises to my mind, and I see it pained, distressed, from what cause I know not, but I would bring back the sunshine again. Alan, she has had enough trouble. I would spare her more. She is so patient and uncomplaining. Is there nothing I can do to make her smile as of yore?"

Alan bowed his head on his hand. Muriel's trouble, he thought, was how to break her news to him. It never struck him that anything he had done was wounding her. Alan's attitude spoke of grief, although neither by word nor manner would he own as much. Mr. Duerdon was distressed, and his patience was tried to the uttermost.

"Muriel is so good and gentle," he said, pursuing the conversation. "Pause, Alan, before you wound her heart. I will send her to you; make the best of your opportunity. Be assured of one thing, *if* there is a misunderstanding between you it is your fault and not hers."

Alan wrung Mr. Duerdon's hand fervently—

"You are right," he said, "People have come between us and separated us, and that is no just cause why we should not be friends as heretofore. Send her to me, Mr. Duerdon, she shall ease her conscience by an explanation, and it shall not part us. I will be as much her friend as ever. So long as I live I must be Murie's advocate and friend. And thank you, Mr. Duerdon, for your persistent endeavour to set us

straight. So forbearing and kind even when I was brusque and rough."

Mr. Duerdon wrung Alan's hand for an answer and left the room. He said no farewell, so satisfied was he that all would be cleared up directly the two lovers—for so Mr. Duerdon considered them in his heart—should meet.

Alan paced the drawing-room in a great state of excitement and restlessness after Mr. Duerdon had left it, so anxious to see Muriel was he. Suppose she would not come and he should have to leave, for months without another look at her dear face, and then perhaps come back only to find her the wife of another. The thought maddened him. True, he might stay at home and see her occasionally, but of what good would that be. At any rate if she did not come at his request now, he must ride over and have one parting word from her lips. One wish for God-speed. And whilst he was thinking this the door opened and Muriel glided in. But, oh! how different from the usual Muriel was she. No look of gladness on her face, no happy welcome; instead only a look of pain of shrinking and of dread. She was afraid to look at Alan, her eyes were kept fixed on the ground. Several things together combined to cause this fear. She supposed Alan was going to disclose to her his engagement to Caroline, thinking she knew something of it. And Muriel wondered how she could bear up whilst he was

speaking to her, dealing her death-blow, as it were. She thought Alan also was heartily ashamed of his display of affection of the day before, that he had seen her glad look of surprise, her happy, joyous delight, as she gave her love unasked for, and she shrank back as she blamed herself for her open, unrestrained eagerness. Did Alan think she would rush at him, snatch at him, as it were, with unmaidenly modesty? Let him once tell her of his engagement to Caroline and then she must assume an air of pleasure and pretend that she was pleased at their approaching union. It would be deceptive, but anything would be better than to let him see how she cared for him. Would that he would at once speak and announce his *penchant*, all the rest would then be plain-speaking so long as he was there. But until he made the fact known her lips were sealed with her promise to Caroline. Foolish promise. And Muriel stood in all humility waiting for Alan to speak. Mr. Duerdon had told her she was wanted in the drawing-room, or else during her brief stay out of it she had decided that never unsought for would she willingly enter Alan's presence again.

"Never, never," so she had said in sorrow and indignation, but when Mr. Duerdon, in his kindly manner, persuaded her she was wanted, she repented and went at once.

Alan construed Muriel's manner into an unwillingness to see him. Ernest had been and proposed, she had accepted him of course, and was

unwilling to tell him that he was left out in the cold. Ah! miserable misunderstanding! cruel suspicions, unjust jealousies. Oh, for the bravery of a little plain-speaking on either side! How often are hearts, loving hearts, divided for ever just for the want of a good explanation. Dear reader, take my advice and never let this mistaken kindness, this false pride be yours. Speak out kindly, firmly, plainly. Wound a little to spare a great deal, and you will have done your best. Always speak out, the gentleman more than the lady, because the privilege is his. If he lets it slip let the lady take upon herself the office. Never separate for the want of a few truthful explanations.

"Good-bye, Al—, Mr. Murray," said Muriel, at length, seeing he was not likely to speak. "Mr. Duerdon told me you wanted to see me, was it to say good-bye?" and Muriel's small hand was held out.

Alan only looked at her, such a searching gaze. Her eyes were raised to him, but they fell; her hand fell down by her side.

"There was some mistake, I suppose," she observed, looking steadfastly on the carpet, as if most anxious to learn off the pattern by heart. "I will go, Alan." She made as if for the door, but quick as she was Alan was quicker; he rushed to it, banged it close and planted himself with his back towards it, his face towards Muriel.

"Not yet; not so soon do you escape me," he

exclaimed, bitterly. "I am no mere shuttlecock to be knocked about at will, neither am I a poor leaf or straw to be blown about recklessly by the wind or toyed with."

Muriel looked up shivering—

"I want to go away," she said.

"I daresay you do. I can quite believe it," and Alan laughed a strange and discordant laugh. "Out of this room you do not stir until we have some explanation."

Muriel waited expectantly, she thought he was going to begin.

"Explanation!" she repeated, as he did not again speak. "I do not think there is any need for one." She thought to spare him in her unselfishness.

"No need!" he said, indignantly, "I should think there was every need."

She looked at him in surprise then. If the necessity were so great why did he not begin.

"I am waiting," he said, after a pause.

"Waiting!" she echoed. "Alan—Mr. Murray, I do not understand you."

"Pshaw!" he said, contemptuously, "do not you, Muriel, of all the world, grow deceitful. If there was one guileless nature anywhere I thought it was yours."

"And have you had reason to change your opinion?" she asked, with quivering lips.

"Your present studied silence rather puzzles me."

"Alan, again I repeat I do not understand you," declared Muriel, timidly. "What do you wish me to say?"

"Do not profess ignorance, it sits ill on you, Muriel. A few words and you could set all things straight. Say them and let me go."

Muriel began seriously to think that Alan had taken leave of his senses. She speak—what had she to tell? Simply nothing; so she said—

"Mr. Murray, again I ask you to let me go."

"Not until you tell me something. You know well enough what I would wish you to say."

"I fail to see by what authority you detain me here," said Muriel, with dignity, drawing her small head up daintily, timidity gone. "I was not aware that I had given you the right to be rude to me. Once more, move Alan, and let me go."

"Do not be angry," pleaded Alan, in a strangely moved voice. "Forgive me if I have behaved or spoken harshly, my mind was sore upset. Caroline told me that"—

"Oh! has Caroline spoken?" interrupted Muriel, a light breaking in on her. "Oh, then we both know all, there is no need to speak. Alan I hope you"— and there Muriel stopped, she was going to say, "will be happy," but she could not.

Alan, of course, misinterpreted her silence. He thought she was going to say, "I hope you will not mind," or something to that effect. "It is all right then," he exclaimed, "you will be glad."

Glad! she looked at him in astonishment. Why should she be glad? If he could only know; but then it would never do to tell him, so she gulped down a sob and nodded her head in assent.

"And there is nothing left for me but to bid you good-bye, Murie. I hope you will always think as well of me as—as you can—that we shall still remain friends."

A wail almost escaped Muriel. Why did he torture her so? But she tried to keep all sorrow back until he was gone. Plenty of time then.

"I hope we shall always be the best of friends," she said, "as long as we live. Just as we promised"—here her voice faltered for the first time—"promised dear Norman. I do not see, Alan, why this—thing need separate us—you and me—perhaps there has been a little"—

"Neither do I," he answered fiercely, and he clutched Muriel as if he would have strained her to him, but she eluded his grasp. He laughed, and she wondered.

Was he so very, very glad, she wondered. Was the trouble always hers? It seemed like it.

But Alan's was not the laugh of a happy heart. More like one in despair.

"Are you very happy, Alan?" she said. "Very glad?"

He looked at her in amazement.

"It was a funny question," she hastily added. "Of course you are"—

"Why should I not be?" he demanded. "But

the question is not whether I am happy—rather we should inquire how "—

"Yes, how Caroline feels," interrupted Muriel, hastily, fearing Alan might say something that she should break down at. If he had asked her how she felt herself Muriel could not have stood it.

"Caroline will be right enough," responded Alan, with a careless indifference Muriel thought to the feelings of his future bride. "I do not see why she should feel anything else."

"No, of course not," murmured poor Muriel. Verily the iron had entered into her soul.

"May I hope that you will write to me once in a while, Muriel, during my absence? My mother can always let you have my address."

"Oh, no, no, I could not write—at least, at least I think it would be better not," said Muriel, trying to keep up.

"That could do no harm," exclaimed Alan, bitterly. "No one could object to that."

"Caroline might."

"What would Caroline have to do with it?"

It was Muriel's turn to laugh. Such a laugh as it was, enough to make a looker-on shed tears.

"Alan, you are too absurd," she declared."

"Oh, am I?" retorted Alan, angrily, all his choler rising. "If I am absurd I cannot return the compliment. You are the hardest-hearted girl, the cruellest, the coldest, the most difficult to please. I never met your like, and I trust I never shall."

Poor Muriel! surely she had not deserved that. A set, determined expression covered her face—just her old expression. She wondered what she had done to rouse Alan's anger, but she tried to nerve herself to bear all that he might say.

"You do not seem to mind in the least although I am going away from Stonecourt, from Astley Park, and from"—here he stopped; he was going to add, "and from you," but he could not, it stuck in his throat somewhere. "I am going to leave every one whom I—whom I like, to sojourn amongst strangers."

"You are going merely to please yourself, I presume," replied Muriel, in a tone of bitterness equal to any he had used. "Surely, Mr. Murray, I have nothing to do with your going."

And anything surpassing her in coldness of tone and self-repression it would be difficult to find.

Alan favoured her with a long stare. Her coolness defied him. Break his heart and then declare she had nothing to do with it. Was the world turned upside down. He could have given a loud groan, and laid his head down on the table.

"Do not—not stare at me so, Alan," spoke Muriel, impatiently. "I never liked anybody to stare at me so."

"Only with exceptions, I suppose."

"Without any exception at all. I consider it rude, and Mr. Murray, I only spoke the truth, you need not doubt me."

"Mr. Murray—the truth," jerked out Alan.

"Well," persisted Muriel, "it seemed so strange that you should blame me for anything. I have nothing to do with your movements."

"Thank you; you really are so wanting in conceit as to suppose that all these new arrangements do not affect me. You think I have no feeling."

"I give you credit for a great deal; but, Alan, I should be the one to go away, not you."

"I fail to see it. Do you think I could remain and witness your"—

"I should not mind that," murmured poor Muriel, thinking he was going to say witness her grief. "You must not think I shall need any pity, Alan."

Muriel's lips quivered suspiciously. She did not like the turn their conversation was taking; why should he think she was grieved; it was not right so she summoned her spirits, and said—

"It will be a very happy day for me."

"And especially so for me," retorted Alan bitterly.

"Cela va sans dire," said Muriel, making a bow.

She longed, oh so intently, that he would go, and leave her to moan her grief out. She never thought he would have been so unkind. He almost seemed to be mocking her. She did not understand his new mood, neither did she like it. Would he never go; should she send him? No; when he once left her presence they would never be the same again. She must keep up a little longer —a little longer.

"Murie, you will miss me when I am away Tell me that much."

A slight pause, a catching of the breath, and Muriel replied.

"Need you ask it; we shall all miss you," and a vision of lonely days—days and weeks, aye, and years, without Alan, rose to the girl's mind, and her eyes were dimmed with tears. A desolate picture lay sketched on her brain's surface.

"All; I do not speak of generalities collectively, but individually. Speak for yourself; it is as much, pardon me, as any one can do; shall you miss me?"

For one moment Muriel made the wide resolve of running away. Alan had moved from his sentinel's post at the door, and they were sitting down. But suppose she failed, was captured ere she reached a place of safety, how small she would feel. She must stay and face it out.

"Murie, can you not say that *you* will miss me?" and Alan's blue eyes looked beseechingly.

Miss him, would not her life be one dark day without him. But she only said—

"How persistent you are! We shall—I shall miss you; there."

"It strikes me it will be a very mitigated sorrow, Murie. My little friend, my dear friend, how easily you have given me up."

"Not so easily," answered Muriel, trembling from head to foot. "But it was best, Alan. What would have been the use of my grieving?"

"You should not have grieved," retorted Alan fiercely. "No, darling, if you had willed otherwise I should have been happy."

It was as much as he thought honourable to say.

Muriel's heart thrilled as he spoke. So tenderly, so kindly. What would Caroline think should she hear him. Alan had almost implied that he would throw her over sooner than that Muriel should be unhappy. Surely he was a good friend, a kind friend to her. But she could not endure his affectionate tones any longer. The harsh manner was hard to bear, but nothing to the loving one. She must bring their parting to a close; he did not seem likely to do so. He had no intention of pursuing such a course.

"My mother will be grieved too, Murie. You will go and see her sometimes."

"With pleasure if she wishes it. Caroline of course will go?"

"I suppose so; my mother and Carrie are good friends."

"Then I scarcely think I shall go," replied Muriel. "Mrs. Duerdon is delicate, and does not like to be left; Caroline and I never were great friends, and we shall not, I daresay, get more attached to each other now. At least—at least," and she broke off. She suddenly remembered she was speaking to Alan of his affianced wife.

"But you will have to become better friends in the future. It will be so much happier for all."

Muriel made no answer. She thought it was very unlikely, but she did not wish to wound Alan by saying so.

"Will you not change your mind about writing once now and then," asked Alan. "Friends always write to each other. No one could object to it."

"Perhaps not; but Al—Mr. Murray, I would rather not," answered Muriel, twining her fingers in and out of each other nervously. Anything that helped to feed her love for him must be checked. No, she must not enjoy the luxury of a letter. Oh, that he would go, and her head drooped, and she had as much to do to keep from crying as she could manage.

"Well, I see that I cannot persuade you to be amenable to reason," remarked Alan, going up to a table, and taking therefrom a pair of gloves which he had thrown down on his entrance into the room. "All that I can get you to own is that you will miss me. And you admit it so reluctantly that it almost seems as if you did not mean it."

He drew a deep breath, half sob, half sigh, in remembrance of all their past pleasant conversation and intercourse which had come abruptly to an end. Then fearing that Muriel might see how unmanned he was by her behaviour, he laughed mirthlessly.

That laugh roused Muriel. She looked indignantly at him. Not the glimmer of a smile rested

on her face; nothing but the old defiant stolidity such as she used to wear in the old days of Mrs. Duerdon's persecutions.

Alan saw her, and his heart sank like lead. All along a little hope had remained in his heart that something would happen, and that she would still be his Muriel, but her face dispelled hope. There was nothing for him now but to be off, and wander away—away in search of rest, which he feared would never be his. He loved her, he loved her, but oh, how hard she was.

"There remains nothing for me now," said Alan, drawing on one of his gloves, "nothing but to say farewell, and wish you every happiness, Miss Vivian."

Muriel had been standing clasping her hands together. She felt so miserable, and she greatly feared breaking down. She scarcely knew what she was doing, and in the midst of it one of her rings rolled on the carpet.

Alan saw it, and stooped to pick it up. It was Norman's ring the Mizpah; the ring Dr. Green had given him years ago. As Alan read the word his handsome face flushed. A sudden idea struck him. He would get Muriel to lend it to him. It would be something of hers, and he felt as if he could not leave without some link between them. That would be just the thing. He must have it, even though she was going to belong to another, and not to him.

"Murie," he said, with great winningness of manner, and handling the small treasure tenderly in his strong hand, "you will lend this to me whilst I am away, will you not? I promise to guard it as I would yourself with the greatest care."

Almost unconsciously to himself Alan had addressed Muriel as gently as ever. She noted the change immediately. Her heart beat quickly, the colour rushed into her cheeks. Had he meant it? Would that no Caroline had come between. No, even whilst she deliberated he remembered himself, his manner became more constrained.

"You hesitate," he said, speaking more stiffly. "Let me have it. I will send you a beauty; a pure pearl, just suited to yourself, the costliest that money could buy. You can think of me now and then, when you look at it. Once in a way you know."

"You are very kind," returned Muriel, "but, please do not be vexed. I would rather have my Mizpah; it was Norman's. Not all the money ever coined could purchase one so full of tender recollections."

"I presume not," rejoined Alan haughtily.

"Please do not be offended," stammered Muriel in confusion. "It was so kind of you wishing to have it. Norman would have been pleased. But I cannot part with it."

"You will soon have another," remarked Alan

jealously. "One that will be fuller of loving associations perhaps than this."

He alluded of course to her engagement ring. Muriel concluded he meant the one he would give.

"No ring can be dearer than this," she explained firmly. "No, I think not."

"Not even the wedding one," and Alan laughed.

"No, not even that," answered the poor girl wearedly. She thought there would never be a wedding ring for her.

Alan gave the subject of marriages up. Muriel evidently did not intend making him a confidant.

"Murie, Norman would have lent this to me had he been alive, and had I asked him."

"Would he, do you think," replied Muriel almost wistfully. "Do you think he would wish me to lend it now? It is very dear to me."

Alan paused before he answered. He was sorely tempted to declare that Norman would so desire it could he interfere. Much as he wanted the memento he did not like taking advantage of her question. He was not selfish enough to deprive her of a treasure unless he could bring her to yield it willingly; neither was he untruthful.

"I think Norman would wish you to do as you like, and so should I," he declared at length, and he spoke more kindly again. "Please yourself first, Murie, but remember if you can spare it how delighted I shall be."

"I could buy you one," observed Muriel, quickly,

a new idea flashing over her. "I could get a valuable one too, and you should choose it, Alan."

"Like you, I do not gauge a ring at its intrinsic worth," replied Alan, with his former haughtiness. "I fancy this ring; you have worn it daily for so long," and he turned it over in his large palm. "I like the 'Mizpah,' the idea of God watching over and between us always, pleases me. This or nothing."

Things had come to a climax. A battle waged within Muriel, to give or not to give; her unselfishness conquered.

"You may have it," she said at last, smothering down a great sigh, "but only for whilst you are away. You will return it to me directly you come home again. I could not give it up altogether."

"Neither would I ask you. Miss Vivian, are you sure you can spare it? I do not wish to be utterly selfish. Speak truly."

Once her mind made up to the sacrifice, Muriel was not one to draw back.

"I should like you to have it," she said, "you can then think of me."

"My dear little friend, I need no reminder, but I shall value this token. If ever I return the ring shall be given by me into your keeping again; if I die it shall be buried with me; you consent to this."

She bowed her head, too troubled to speak.

"I suppose it will make but little difference to

you, Murie, whether I come back or not," he remarked, bitterly, "so long as you get your ring. You will be happy; my absence will affect you but little. I must try and make arrangements that in case of anything unforeseen happening to me, that you get your 'Mizpah.'"

"Don't, Alan," pleaded Muriel.

"Well, I do not wish to grieve you unnecessarily, my dear friend, Murie, my sister, but life is so uncertain, something might occur, it is well to leave all things settled."

Muriel would have spoken but her throat was choking. Had she opened her mouth she must have betrayed herself. Alan thought her silence proceeded from indifference, yet but a minute before she had been moved.

"I suppose I expect more than friendship demands," he said, presently. "We have been friends so long that I thought you would have shown some grief at my departure. Some outward demonstration, but you seem so quiet, Murie."

"Is it not better so, Alan? Will it not please you better to think my life is happy and contented. I would not have you start with one thought of me to mar your pleasure."

"You are truthful and candid," he said, "and some people rate those qualities very highly. They are well enough in their way, but I would have them mated with a little heart."

No answer. Better for him to think she had

none than read her affection for him. Would he never, never go?

"Well," he remarked, with a heavy sigh, "I am keeping you, and that is not kind of me. There was a time, Murie, and not so long since, when you would not have liked to let me go, but I will say no more to annoy you. Allow me to thank you once more most heartily for the loan of your ring." She made a movement as if in dissent of receiving thanks. He took no notice, but went on "Murie, my—Miss Vivian, let me ask one more favour, the last. Will you place it on my finger yourself?" Alan drew off his glove as he spoke.

"Oh, I could not, I could not," uttered Muriel, in dismay.

Alan looked at her in intense surprise. "You could not, Murie, why not?"

For an answer she hung her head. She trembled from head to foot. Oh, Alan was dense not to read the signs aright.

"You might try at any rate." Still silence. "Murie, no one could possibly object," resumed Alan, thinking he had found a clue to her strange behaviour. "You are my sister now and always, in spite of every one."

"I will try," she said, laconically.

Alan handed her the ring, and she took it, but as for getting it on she made but a poor attempt.

"Why," observed Alan, in amazement, "you

are quite nervous, your hand trembles, and that finger of mine is too large, you must try the little one." Her awkwardness astonished him, she was generally so deft and clever.

"You are not afraid of hurting me, Muriel," Alan remarked, "you need not be. I am such a great strong fellow. Besides, your little fingers are so frail," he said, reassuringly, "that they could not hurt me."

"The ring is too small," answered Muriel, glad of an excuse.

"Not it," said Alan, confidently. "It must go on, I mean to wear it if it is ever so tight. I must undergo a course of Banting," and he laughed, "or else have the finger planed, but go on it shall. Please try again."

Muriel nerved herself, and with one desperate tug succeeded.

"*Un fait accompli.* You have conquered at last, as I hope you will succeed in everything you undertake. Now I will detain you no longer. Miss Vivian farewell; may God watch over you always."

It was nearly over now, a few more minutes and Alan would be gone. He held out his hand. Muriel placed hers within it without speaking. That seemed to hurt Alan.

"Oh, say something, Murie, a word—just one. Wish me God-speed. Oh, would that I had not to go!"

The last sentence broke from him involuntarily, against his better judgment, as it were. Muriel's heart aroused at that cry. She would liked to have gone to him and comforted him with soothing words, but that might not be, he was another's. Full of perplexity and distress, with the prospect of her own sorrow also, that lay like a desolate track before her, as yet untrodden, and with no footprints on it. Her feet alone had to tread it—no one else. Each mark would be left in desolation and sorrow. In the midst of her distress, Muriel could not help wondering why Alan was going away. What had occasioned it so suddenly, and why was he so unwilling to go. She did wish he would explain a little.

"I am very sorry you feel obliged to leave us," said Muriel, at last, "very sorry, but you must not grieve about it," and her voice arose to earnest entreaty.

Alan gave one long, lingering look at the face he loved, one squeeze of the hand, and without another word was gone. The gong sounded ere he could have got through the hall, the one that pronounced it time to dress for dinner. For many a long day after that Muriel never heard the gong without it giving a piercing pain to her heart. It always reminded her so forcibly of her parting from Alan. Not that she needed any reminder, but if for a brief spell her thoughts had flown to something else, they were suddenly recalled by

that sound. The echoes of it were only dying out that miserable day. Alan had gone, and Muriel's head went down in abandonment of grief. There was no more happiness in the world for her. Why, oh why had Alan always been so kind and gained her deepest love? He had only meant it to be taken in a brotherly, friendly way, and she had been unmaidenly enough to attach a far deeper meaning, and Muriel acknowledged to herself in great bitterness of spirit that she was the most unfortunate girl, always in trouble—unhappiness and woe were her portion. Such reflections as these are not consoling. They do not tend to comfort and alleviate. Muriel's cup was full. There is a saying that "night is darkest when dawn is nearest." Would it be so in her case?

CHAPTER XII.

"Muriel, here is a letter for you, with the Paris postmark on it," exclaimed Mr. Duerdon, from behind a pile of documents.

Muriel's face flushed as she took it; she guessed pretty correctly from whom it came.

It was three weeks later than the events recorded in the last chapter; three long, dreary weeks, through which Muriel had literally ploughed in her sorrow; three weeks which made her shudder to look back upon. She stood upon the lonely track; her footmarks were imprinted deeply behind, but she did not care to turn round and look at them; neither dared she raise her head and glance at the boundless waste which stretched away, away before her in the future. With a sickening longing she moaned for one sight of Alan, one sound of his voice, one token from his hand. She knew she had positively declined to write—oh, how foolishly. She thought it was vain to expect a letter from him, and yet day by day she rose in expectation and longing, and at last, at the end of three weeks came the much-desired missive. And when it arrived, and Muriel had the precious token in her presence, in her very hand, she was almost

afraid to open it, so overjoyed was she, so fearful of dispelling her happiness.

Mr. Duerdon and she were sitting in the breakfast-room taking their breakfast. Mrs. Duerdon had not yet come down; she generally enjoyed that meal upstairs. Mr. Duerdon was too much occupied with his letters to watch Muriel; letters of business, mining shares, consols, were his. They quite engrossed his attention, though he was fully aware that Muriel had heard by that post from Alan. But at last his business had been attended to. He arranged his papers together, and with one admonitory clap on the top to warn them to keep together, he proceeded to his breakfast with undivided attention. Muriel sat at the head of the table attending to the coffee. A few minutes and Mr. Duerdon looked up, expectation on his countenance. Muriel took no notice, she went on eating without even glancing at her guardian. Perhaps she purposely avoided meeting his eye.

"Well, Muriel," observed he at last.

"Yes, Mr. Duerdon," she answered, interrogatively.

"Come, now, Muriel, tell me from whom is your letter. How is—umph!—let me know all about it."

"I have heard from Alan," announced Muriel, calmly. She knew that that would be no news, Alan's writing was well known in the house.

"From Alan," repeated Mr. Duerdon, in

pretended dismay. "What has he to write about?"

"It is a nice kind letter, like Alan himself," said Muriel. "You shall read it. Paris must be a charming place, from his description. Uncle Fred, we must go there some time."

"Next week, my dear, if you like, if you can only get your aunt to be agreeable."

"Not so soon," dissented Muriel, with a smile. "Spring will be soon enough." She had no intention of running after Alan, no wish to hunt him up. She handed Mr. Duerdon her letter.

"Thank you, my dear. No, I will not read it. Secrets—confidential chit-chat. It was not meant for my eyes."

"Yours and all the world's," replied Muriel, with an unconscious sigh. "Please take it, I should like you to read all he has to say."

Mr. Duerdon complied, and as he put the letter down a shade of dissatisfaction crossed his face. It was not the kind of letter he had expected. There are such fine grades of distinction in these things. One word more or less make such a difference. The extra words had been omitted in Alan's letter. It was brotherly, friendly, kindly in every point, but decidedly not loverly.

"Umph! it is altogether satisfactory," remarked Mr. Duerdon, in a tone that implied quite the contrary. "But what he has gone away for at this time of the year is a mystery to me. Alan is

a famous sportsman, and pheasants are plentiful this season. Not two minutes ago I heard the report of a gun, it reminded me of him. Will you enlighten me as to his reason for leaving?"

"I know no more than you do. I fancied he had business to attend to."

"Business abroad! What for? He is an idle man, that is, I mean an independent gentleman. Business has no claims on him."

"So I see; he has quite gone for pleasure," and Muriel spoke bitterly. Recovering herself she said, "You see Alan has begged me to answer his letter, do you think it advisable for me to do so?"

Mr. Duerdon favoured Muriel with a stare.

"I mean," stammered she, in confusion, "had I better write to him under the circumstances?"

"I cannot see any cause for hesitation," replied Mr. Duerdon, decisively. "Perhaps there is something I do not know."

"I only thought Caroline might"—and there Muriel suddenly stopped. Had she any right to blazon Alan's engagement to the world? Would he not have done it had he wished it to be known? Besides, there was her promise to Caroline, was that binding as far as every one was concerned? Puzzle her head as she might, Muriel could not remember altogether what she had promised to withhold. Therefore she had better not say anything; not commit herself to repeat any part of the conversation which she knew had taken place

when her own mind was in a whirl, her head one mass of chaotic disorder.

"Caroline," repeated Mr. Duerdon, catching up the name. "Do you mean Miss Danvers? I suppose you must. But what can she have to do with it?"

Muriel hung her head, but Mr. Duerdon caught more meaning from her silence than he might have done had she spoken. A light broke in on him. Muriel was jealous of Caroline. Certainly there seemed some cause, Caroline was a lovely and a graceful girl, one in every way fitted to become Alan's wife. But then Alan had seemed to prefer Muriel. Had he behaved falsely and deserted her, after all the care and devotion he had so carefully bestowed? Mr. Duerdon was upset by the idea. He grew restless and uneasy. If the fellow was a scamp he might well hide himself abroad until the indignation and anger which his conduct would certainly arouse had died away. Something of this trembled on Mr. Duerdon's tongue. He was going to break out into expletives when the letter flashed across him. Alan was not, could not be any other than honourable, upright, after that. Did not his every action hitherto denote it? Muriel's letter was only a friendly one because Alan did not see his way clear to proposing yet—or perhaps—and Mr. Duerdon felt the blood rush into his head at the idea—he had really preferred Caroline all along. His attentions had never been such as Mr. Duerdon had presumed them to be.

"Does Caroline care for Alan?" questioned Mr. Duerdon, presently. "Are her hopes fixed on becoming Mrs. Murray? Slightly ambitious, is she not?"

"Caroline was ever ambitious," replied Muriel parrying the question.

"Had she anything to do with Alan's going away?"

Muriel deliberated. She was not wondering what answer to give, simply what words she had best use. "She may have had," was the cautious reply.

"Pigs may fly, but I never heard that they did," said Mr. Duerdon, significantly. He rose then, he had no further wish to prolong the conversation. Time and patience would show him things better than anxiety and curiosity would. "All things come to him who wait."

"I would answer Alan's letter by all means," he remarked, collecting his papers together ready to start into another room. "Send him a nice newsy one, full of home and us all. It will please him. Alan has ever been a good friend to you, repay him in kind now that you have the opportunity. Something has occurred to vex him, do not you add to his worries."

"I will write," answered Muriel, with a flutter of joy at her heart at the thought. "I think, however, you are mistaken about Alan, he seems in famous spirits. What should there be to render

him otherwise? I always look upon Mr. Murray as a thoroughly happy man, free from care."

"Aye, youth, and a good constitution," assented Mr. Duerdon, rather enviously. "Yes, our young friend Alan is a fortunate fellow."

"Youth and a good constitution," repeated Muriel herself, as Mr. Duerdon left the room. "What are they? I have them both, yet what a failure my life is. When Norman died I thought no other trouble could come near me; yet see, here I am again. But I do not feel quite so bad this morning. Alan has not forgotten me. If he loves Caroline he cares a great deal for me. Oh! Alan, my friend, my friend," and she covered her face.

A servant entered the room to remove the breakfast things. Muriel got up and walked to one of the windows. It was a bright fresh morning, such as often comes in October. The air was clear, the trees shedding their golden coat fast, the ground was covered with the leaves without, dead everywhere. In little heaps lay they, ready for the gardener's wheelbarrow, or if he was not quick enough, ready to be scattered by the next high wind. Some people say sunshine is always pleasant, but it is possible for there to be times when it is absolutely trying. Muriel had found it so lately. Days had passed in which a leaden and dull sky would have agreed better with her spirits; days when the sun seemed to mock her by its joy-

fulness, contrasting so strongly with her heart's despair. She felt it a want of harmony and sympathy, a positive discord which produced a jar. Surely we have all felt this. As Muriel looked out on the rich autumnal tints she became aware that that feeling had fallen from her. She no longer minded the external brightness, for internally there was a more peaceful spirit than she had owned since Alan's departure. His letter had effected much. She folded it closely between her clasped hands.

"Dear Alan," she mused, "it was just like him, writing in spite of all my temper. So friendly and good. He certainly intends that his marriage shall make no difference in our intercourse. I am glad, very glad. He cannot possibly have lost his respect for me, or he would never have written. I wonder how often Caroline hears from him? She did not seem very pleased when I asked her last time. I do not know how I summoned up courage to inquire, but I grew so lonely with never a word to cheer me, no letter from Mrs. Murray, no hopes as days went by of seeing Alan pop in as he used to do, and I got desperate. Six times before had we met, she and I, since Alan went away, and not one mention of his name. I could not bear it; how was it to be expected that I should? If she were his affianced was not I his dear friend, his adopted sister? Did not I know twice as much of him as she did? Aye, and more, a hundred times,

for we had been friends for years. He had peeped into my heart many a time when we had been conversing about Norman. So on coming out of church last Sunday I waited for her. She saw me, but she never hurried to meet me. I fancy she dislikes me greatly because I like Alan. Strange that it should be so, nevertheless it is often a fact that one girl does not like another girl to care for her sweetheart. Expressive word that. Alan is her sweetheart—brave, manly Alan. Well, when Caroline reached me, I inquired of course first after her grandpapa, he had not been to church. 'Oh! he's well enough,' she said, scornfully. 'He is full of whims and fancies.'

"'He is old, too, Caroline,' I answered, trying to speak with forbearing gentleness.

"'What if he is, other people have been old before him.'

"'Yes, and many will be again,' I replied, significantly.

"'I hope I never shall,' observed Caroline, crossly.

"We walked on in silence after that, and Ernest overtook us. Ernest had taken the whole service. He does it well. Simple, unpretending, and very plain, and just what is wanted in a village church. Ernest is very quick and methodical, but he makes a good clergyman. He took my hand in his and held it. I cannot tell what makes me so foolish, but I always think Ernest cares for me. Dull,

practical fellow, unselfish and slow, self-denying and kind, yet never the one for me. A good man, a worthy man, as was Mr. Maitland, but not one to stir my heart as does Alan. How my thoughts travel from one to another. Ernest was called away by some friend amongst his poor, an old man who had the rheumatiz, so he styled it. After shaking hands with me again, Ernest hurried to his rheumatic parishioner and gave him his arm. Caroline laughed at him. 'Did you ever see any one like Ernest?' she asked me; 'he has not got the least self-respect.' I knew what she meant, but I thought he was right to help old Chambers, and I said so.

"She turned and looked at me and said, 'You are just a pair, you and my Uncle Ernest; you would both demean yourself with those poor people by shaking hands with them, giving them your arm, or by assisting them in any way you could. I consider it shameful. Poor people ought to be taught to keep their places.'

"'Kindness will never surely teach them anything else, Carrie.'

"'Pooh! pooh! Familiarity breeds contempt.'"

"I argued no more. It would have been useless. Besides I had something else to think about. I wanted to ask about Alan. The tables were turned; formerly she had to ask me. Now I had to question her, and my heart beat and beat with excitement and dread. It was beating enough to

burst its prison, but I was not going to turn coward.

"'Have you heard from Alan lately?' I summoned up nerve sufficient to inquire.

"She turned and looked at me. How pretty she was in her new bonnet and fine laces!

"'What a funny girl you are, Muriel,' she replied.

"Funny! Why?"

"'For asking such a simple question. What made you think I should hear from him?'

"It was my turn to stare. How cool she was. Seeing she was not going to condescend to answer me, I continued—

"'Where is he now?'

"She paused, stammered slightly, and at last said, 'He is in London.'

"'Is he quite well, Caroline?'

"'Goodness me, yes. He is well enough for all I know. Stay, though, now I think of it, he had scratched his hand, and it was likely to turn to a pig's foot.'

"I turned away from her angrily. Was she always to turn everything into ridicule?

"'Are you going home?' she asked.

"'I am,' I answered. We had stood on the borders of the churchyard ever since Ernest had left us.

"'You are in a mighty hurry, Muriel.'

"'On the contrary, I have some time to get rid of.'

"'Will you walk slowly home, I will send Ernest after you to beguile the time?'

"'Thank you; do not trouble him. He has his sermons and his school to attend to; my own company suffices for me—is, in fact, all I require.'

"'We are very independent,' she said coolly. 'I thought you were going to cut me *in toto*. Yet for ever so many times since you have passed that resolution you have spoken. I feel highly honoured.'

"I ignored that speech. In fact I had considered it better for all sides to keep on speaking terms, whatever, she said.

"'Muriel, how pale you look.'

"'I am cold.' I did not like to say unhappy, though that would have been the truth.

"'You are sure that my remark about Alan has not upset you? He will doubtless be better soon.'

"I left her without another word, and after all my inquiries had done but little good. Alan was in London, but in what part, or with whom, or what had occasioned his going, were all hidden from me."

All these things pondered Muriel, as she stood looking out of the breakfast-room window.

"I will get my things on now, and go and inquire after Mr. Mervin, poor old gentleman," solilo-

quised she. "The first part of the day is the best."

"Are you lost in thought, Muriel, or are you spell-bound," inquired a voice behind.

Muriel turned. It was Mr. Duerdon.

"I was only thinking a little bit," she replied, but the colour mantled into her cheeks. She had been quite lost to all around. The breakfast table was cleared, and Mr. Duerdon sitting before the fire reading his paper. She wondered how long she had been musing.

"I spoke to you twice," laughed Mr. Duerdon, "and you never answered. I should not have disturbed you at last, only I got alarmed, you were so still. A kind of waking dream, Muriel, I suppose. I hope it was a pleasant one."

"Neither pleasant nor unpleasant," replied Muriel, "or rather I should say both."

"You have a happier look this morning than you have had for some time," said Mr. Duerdon, turning his paper over. "Your face has lost a weary look."

"Oh, I hope I have not been selfish enough to look miserable," replied Muriel, with a sudden qualm of conscience; "it would be very ungrateful of me."

"Never ungrateful, Muriel, never that, always the best and kindest girl both to my wife and me."

Muriel's face, as might be expected, flushed with

pleasure. It was pleasant to think that some one cared for her.

"I am going to the Vicarage, Uncle Fred, to inquire how Mr. Mervin is, can I execute any errands in the village for you?"

"None; but I am glad you are seeing after the vicar. I always like to hear how he is."

CHAPTER XIII.

MURIEL found Caroline in a most amiable mood. She was busy tucking and frilling an evening dress.

"It was so becoming the other evening that every one remarked how beautiful I looked," said Caroline, holding up a piece of ribbon to her cheek and turning her head coquettishly for Muriel to see how it became her complexion.

"Very pretty," replied Muriel, calmly, but she alluded more to the dress than its wearer.

"Yes, I flatter myself I have very good taste. Not like you, Muriel, you do not seem to care what you wear as long as you are clothed."

"Do I not? I scarcely think I am as bad as that, but how is your grandpapa, Caroline?"

"What a fuss you make about the old man, to be sure, twice as much as I do. He might be your grandfather instead of mine. He has got a pain in his big toe and is fearful of the gout."

"Poor man!" uttered Muriel, compassionately, but she scarcely knew whether Caroline was speaking ironically or not.

"Aye, it is a case of poor man," replied Caroline, equably. "I am going to leave him soon. Muriel, have you heard that I am going to be married?"

Muriel stared open-mouthed.

"How queer you look," remarked Caroline. "Do you think my wits are wool-gathering?"

"No, no!—but of course you told me that—that evening that you were going to be married some time, but I thought you"—

"So I did," interrupted Caroline, throwing her work down. "Aye, I said I would wait until after Mrs. Murray was married, but I have changed my mind, she is in no hurry, and my future lord thinks it absurd to wait so long when there is nothing to wait for."

Muriel said to herself they might have waited for Mrs. Murray's departure before Caroline was installed as mistress at Stonecourt, but aloud she spoke differently.

"Alan is coming home, then?"

"I am sure I do not know. Mr. Murray has not favoured me with his intentions."

"But I thought you said you were going to be married?"

"So I am, in less than a month."

Muriel's head was all confused, she scarcely knew what question to ask next. For want of anything better she said—

"I had a letter from Alan this morning."

"Had you? Where is the truant gentleman?"

"At Paris. But how strange of you to ask, surely you know better than I do as to his whereabouts?"

"Muriel, you must be hopelessly and densely stupid. I have told you three or four times quite plainly that I know nothing of Alan. I never hear from him. I never get a word of him—will that satisfy you?"

"Yet you told me you were going to marry him in less than a month. What am I to think of you, Caroline?"

"Can you not put two and two together?"

"As well as any one when I can get the second number firmly in my grasp. At present I seem to have neither."

"Listen: in less than four weeks from this date I shall be a married lady. Alan Murray has gone away. I have never heard a single word either of or from him since he went. Now can you not guess?"

"Oh! Caroline, you and he have quarrelled. I am sorry. Poor Alan! he will mind!"

"Quarrelled, and going to be married shortly," retorted Caroline, impatiently. "Muriel, Muriel, que vous êtes bête."

At length a light broke in on Muriel, but such a highly coloured, improbable light, that she scarcely liked to name it.

"Surely, surely—you—do not—mean—to say that"—and she stopped. Could any girl in her senses throw over handsome Alan for another? It was not likely.

"You hesitate," said Caroline, tapping her foot

with impatience. "You will not hurt me, speak out."

"You are—not—going to be married—to some one else?"

"You have at length hit the right nail on the head. Alan and I are nothing to each other. You are denser, Muriel, than I gave you credit for."

It would be impossible to tell of the rush of happiness that flooded Muriel's heart. Would that she had wings just then to fly to Alan and nestle near him for ever. Alan free! free! free! Could she not get to him? But, oh! there was a barrier that separated them yet.

"What has made you and Alan disagree?" she asked, with sudden recollection that he might be unhappy. "Did you quarrel before he went away? He certainly seemed very upset for a successful lover that last afternoon."

"He and I have not disagreed; we never were lovers, never shall be. Is everything growing clear?"

"All is indistinct and strange; there is something wrong somewhere. You told me that you were engaged to Alan, and that you"—

"I told you lots of crams," replied Caroline, composedly, "because you are such a goose. When you asked me where he was, I said in London, and I knew no more than you do, perhaps less; but I love to—excuse the expression—humbug you."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," exclaimed Muriel, indignantly.

"I am sorry that you believed me," continued Caroline, "but I thought you and Alan would soon set matters straight. However, it is not too late now."

"And Alan never really loved you?" asked Muriel, interrogatively, a sigh of deep content escaping her.

"Oh! I will not say that," replied Caroline. "I must own that he had a decided weakness for me, but I saw it would not do to encourage him."

Muriel understood Caroline's vanity well.

"If you had had a chance of Alan," she said, frankly, "you would have accepted him. No one would reject him."

"Speak for yourself, I fly at better game."

"There is no better," replied Muriel, bravely. "And you know that, Caroline. But by the way, who is the favoured individual? I quite forgot to ask."

Caroline pouted. "Mr. Worlaby, of Worlaby Grange."

"Oh! Caroline, he is too old."

"He is not very young, certainly."

"Over fifty, if he is a day."

"He will be sixty next birthday," returned Caroline, calmly. "He owns to that, so perhaps he is sixty-five."

"And he is so plain; and then his grown-up sons! Oh, Carrie! you must not marry him."

"But I am going to do, Miss Softheart; he is very rich, and I shall keep my carriage, and be a grand lady. I am poor enough now."

"Will you sell yourself for money?"

"I will; if by that you mean marry Mr. Worlaby. You need not look so pityingly, Muriel, mine is a position to be envied."

"Do you care for him? Can you bear to think of spending your life in his company?" asked Muriel, in suspense.

"You put things pretty plainly," replied Caroline, taking up her work again and toying with it.

"I do. I would keep you back from such barter by all earnest entreaty," said Muriel. "Oh, consider what you are about! Do you love Mr. Worlaby?"

Caroline laughed.

"As if anybody could care for such a stiff old man. Mine will be a marriage de convenance. I would far rather have had one of his sons, but then they have not the money. Muriel, you sensible, serious girl, be happy, you cannot alter my determination. I mean—as you so politely put it—to sell myself, and marry that old yellow skinned Mr. Worlaby! Ugh!" and Caroline made a grimace. "He is plain, but perhaps he will not live so very long—let's hope not."

This distressed Muriel greatly. She thought it dreadfully sad. Two large tears rolled down her cheeks. She went and took one of Caroline's hands and held it between her own.

"Think what you are about, Carrie," she pleaded, with grave earnestness. "Pause ere it be too late. You have a happy home, kind parents and relations, friends, money, health, beauty, and everything that this world can give. Wait, and marry for love."

"I do not believe in love," was the bitter reply. and in that speech might be caught the clue to all Caroline's actions. As she could not win Alan, she would marry the first wealthy man that proposed, and unfortunately Mr. Worlaby was he.

"Not believe in love!" said Muriel, with, kindling eye. "Why, Caroline, love is before everything. Be persuaded by me—do not accept Mr. Worlaby. I entreat, I beg of you—as sure as you live you will repent some day."

"Spare yourself those heroics. You would make a famous tragedy queen," remarked Caroline, coldly. "We will say nothing about the uncomplimentariness of your observations—unflattering as they were in the extreme. I have accepted Mr. Worlaby. Mamma is already giving the orders for my wedding, and I shall not be so foolish as to turn back merely because the bridegroom elect is old, plain, and stupid. Let us talk of something more agreeable to you. How is Alan?"

"He seems very well—you shall read his letter," and Muriel fumbled in her pocket for it.

"Thanks; it would not be interesting to me. Does he ask when your wedding is coming off?"

"My wedding!" exclaimed Muriel, laughing. "He might as well ask me when the end of the world was to be. I could answer one question as well as the other."

"Pooh! you are a goose, Muriel. Some people's eyes are no good to them. Anybody could see with half an eye who worships the ground you tread on."

"They are very silly, whoever they may be," laughed Muriel.

"Do you not know who I mean?"

"I have not the remotest idea."

"Why, Alan, to be sure! Where do you keep your senses?"

"Alan!" uttered Muriel, in bewilderment, and then remembering their parting of a few weeks before, she said, with great earnestness, "You are greatly mistaken, Alan is very displeased at me."

"Have you not guessed why?"

Caroline was determined to make a clean breast of everything. Since her engagement to Mr. Worlaby she did not care whether Alan and Muriel married; in fact she would rather they did.

"Do you know why Alan was angry with me?" asked Muriel, eagerly. "Oh, please tell me."

"I am going to do as quickly as I can, if you will only let me. Some one told Alan that you

were engaged to Ernest, and it made him nearly wild."

"Made who nearly wild?"

"Alan, to be sure. Ernest would be only too glad were it true."

"And Alan actually believed it," said Muriel, trying to remember some of the conversation. "What a muddle it all is to be sure; Alan thought I was engaged to Ernest, and I thought he was engaged to you. I see where we were wrong. Who told him?"

"That does not signify; some one did."

"Was it Ernest?"

"No, it was not; but do not be inquisitive, he was told."

"Caroline"—speaking very falteringly—"was it you?"

"Did I not do enough in telling *you* falsely? Do not think me all bad. Oh, spare me, Muriel, I would make amends," said Miss Danvers, contritely.

Muriel got up and crossed over to Caroline. The last few weeks had been very sad to bear, but a great joy was at her heart now. She stooped down and kissed the lovely face in all forgiveness.

"There is much that puzzles me," she said, frankly, "but I will not question you. If you said all that you did wantonly—cruelly—it was very hard and very inexplicable. But I am, as you say, dense and slow, it may come to me in time."

Caroline jumped up, her short repentant fit ended—her good angel flown away.

"Let us go into the garden," she said. "Oh! here is Ernest. He will dawdle and keep us now."

Ernest's eyes beamed love through his spectacles but Muriel avoided meeting them.

"Very kind of you coming to inquire after my father," he said. "There is nothing really wrong with him, but he loses strength. All my care this winter will be spent on looking after him. He is a dear father."

Muriel did some sick-visiting for an hour. She could scarcely help contrasting Ernest's care for the old man and Caroline's indifference as she went home. It was very marked. A few days later a messenger rode over from Stonecourt with a parcel for Muriel. It contained two beautifully bound books. One was "Lyra Angelica," the other a large edition of Keble's "Christian Year;" a much larger one than Miss Bradshaw had in years gone by given a copy of to both the Vivians. Muriel opened the fly-leaf, and in Alan's well-known writing was "From Alan to Muriel, September 28." It had been the day he had gone away.

"I wonder why I have only just received them? Just as well anyway, for if they had come before I had heard of Caroline's engagement I should have returned them," soliloquised Muriel.

Turning to place the two volumes on the table,

she saw a note at her feet. It was from Mrs. Murray.

"My dear Muriel—

"Alan left this parcel for you in his bedroom, but as it was not directed, and he left no word for whom it was meant, the housekeeper concluded it was his own. In a letter, however, from him this morning, he asks whether you have received it. He is at the Hotel de Brabant, Paris.

"Yours, &c.,

"Eleanor A. M. Murray."

"A stiff little note," sighed Muriel, "and unlike Mrs. Murray. Perhaps she feels angry with me for her son's absence. She need not. I miss him as much as she does. Oh! Caroline, what have you done? Not separated us for ever? No, no, I hope not! There is hope yet!—only how sadly we both blundered, Alan and I! Had we both spoken out. Ah, me! ah, me! Yet I must not altogether blame myself, for I was under a promise not to tell. I will run in the Park and dispel my wish to see Alan."

Snatching a large garden hat off the hat stand, and wrapping a shawl over her shoulders, Muriel took a stroll in the Park. She had not gone very far before the bell tolling reached her ears—a muffled toll, a most unusual thing in the village.

It must be for some one important. A curious, chilly feeling passed over Muriel. She tried to shake it off by walking to the lodge. The man had just come in from his work for dinner. He was head gardener at Mr. Duerdon's.

"Have you heard, miss?" he asked, seeing Muriel's expressive face.

"No," she replied, "who is it?"

"Our Vicar, miss. One of the men brought word all the blinds is down in the village, and the folk are sorry. He passed away quite peaceful about an hour ago. He was up and dressed just as usual, but said he felt tired; then he called out, 'Fanny! Fanny!' and before the doctor arrived he was gone."

"Fanny was Mrs. Mervin," said Muriel, the tears raining down her face. "How sad, both gone. Mr. Ernest is vicar now; it is a family living. Dear me, I am sorry."

"And so will a mort of folk be, miss. Mr. Ernest is a nice young gent enough in his way, but he is nowhere near his father. He were a book-larned gentleman."

Aye, even Mr. Mervin already had become a thing of the past. Here one minute, gone the next! How soon, my reader, may it be said of you and me—"Ah! she was a good one," or "a bad one," as the verdict may be.

CHAPTER XIV.

Muriel's letter to Alan was full of news. She wrote freely and unreservedly as if no estrangement had happened. Knowing now, as she did, the cause of his anger the day he had left, she could not but be sorry that they had each misunderstood the other so egregiously. Still she would not say "Come home, and all will be right." Neither did she care to say that Ernest and she were not engaged. She was the lady, and it would be forward of her to make any advances. But she told of Mr. Mervin's death, and of Caroline's swiftly approaching marriage; for the wedding was not to be put off, but to take place at Mrs. Danvers' house quietly. Caroline was greatly disappointed at having to give up a grand wedding. She loved ostentation, and show, and plenty of grandeur. These things would have compensated to her for her sacrifice. But they were not to be.

Mr. Worlaby, who considered he was condescending greatly in taking a penniless girl to his bosom was not to be delayed by any nonsense. He wanted a lovely face at the head of his table, and if Caroline was not willing lots of other

girls were. She must take him at once or not at all. And Caroline having put her hand to the plough, her heart to the sacrifice, would not look back.

Nothing of all this, however, did Muriel recount, merely the bare facts that the wedding was to be and when. She mentioned the fact that Ernest was vicar, and that he seemed much cut up, just as she would have mentioned it all had she been on the former friendly footing with Alan, and no estrangements between.

This and a lot more, and a very nice epistle went to him. But it did not bring Alan back. No word came from him, and Muriel wondered if she had written in too friendly a tone.

Caroline's wedding took place at her own home quietly, and the bride and bridegroom went away on their travels. Muriel grieved over the sad demoralisation that must take place in any one's character before they could bring themselves to sacrifice all hopes of love and home, and sell, actually sell themselves, as much as a slave is sold merely for cold, hard glittering gold. Sooner would Muriel have toiled year in year out than done as Caroline had done. With all her spirits Muriel could not have gone with a smile on her lips, a lie on her heart, and married some one whom she disliked.

November had gone quietly, nothing of event occurred, no letter from Alan, no news from Stone-

court, yet Muriel kept up bravely, hopefully. In January Mrs. Murray would be married, Alan must come back then.

Early in December Muriel was greatly astonished one day to meet Miss Bradshaw in the village street; the limp nearly gone, the face fuller, plumper, and not a day older to look at. Muriel was sorry to think how the once kind governess had been forgotten. For years her name had never been mentioned, and then to come on her suddenly, it was quite like a rising from the dead.

"My dear old pupil!" exclaimed Miss Bradshaw, warmly.

"Dear Dickie," responded Muriel, and how strange the long-disused name sounded.

"The same grave, sweet, earnest face," pursued Miss Bradshaw.

"The kindest, best of governesses," declared Muriel, much moved. "You must come home with me, and see them all; they will be so pleased."

"I will call another day," declined the old governess. "I have much to settle before I come to reside here again. I do not intend coming until January."

And so they parted, but they neither of them foresaw how full of import to them was to be Miss Bradshaw's return to Astley.

One day shortly before Christmas Caroline drove

over in great state to see Muriel. She was most magnificently and fashionably dressed, and had become quite an attractive young matron. It was surprising how her girlish manner had changed, but then she had always been quite self-possessed. She laughed boisterously at Muriel, as people do laugh whose hearts are not at rest.

"You dear old heathenish thing!" she exclaimed, "how quaint and old-maidish you look. Just see what travel does for one! I never realized what a guy you made of yourself. Properly dressed with a French maid you really could be turned out presentable."

Muriel laughed quietly.

"I dress as every one does about here, Caroline."

"But you should set the fashions; you scarcely know how behind the time you are. Three years at least. I daresay you wonder I am not in mourning for grandpapa."

"No, I did not; I never believed in mourning. I look upon it as a most ridiculous fashion. It is impossible to gauge people's sorrow by the depth of their crape. Besides, Caroline, you are a bride. How is Mr. Worlaby?"

Mrs. Worlaby made a wry face.

"Well enough as far as I know, I never ask him." Then abruptly, as if not caring to continue the conversation about her husband, she asked: "Have you received an invitation to the ball at

Stonecourt on Twelfth Night. Mrs. Murray is to be married the day after."

"No, I have never heard a word about it. Are all the invitations issued?"

"Every one; it is a large affair, I can assure you. They have given just three weeks' notice; little enough time too to get a dress from Worth's."

"Are you sending there for a robe?" asked Muriel, surprised at the change a few weeks had effected.

"Yes. I must have *some* compensation," was the significant reply.

Muriel never questioned what she meant. She feared she knew only too well. Alas! alas! had it come to such a pass as that. Worth's dresses making up for love and home; ah, it was sad. And so soon!

"Strange that you are not invited to Stonecourt," remarked Mrs. Worlaby, before taking her leave. "I must see after it. There must be some mistake."

"I beg that you will not interfere at all about it," desired Muriel, with dignity. "I am happy either way."

After Caroline's departure Muriel could not help wondering why she had not been asked to the dance. Every one for miles round she knew would be there. In fact her non-invitation bore to her a singular significance. It was most pointed. Well

she remembered how Alan had once laughingly declared when speaking of the ball that was to celebrate his mother's marriage with Sir Phillip Verdun that he should open it with her. She had retorted indignantly, thinking he was making fun of her, and then all his gaiety had died away, and he had asserted most earnestly that he meant what he said. And after all she had not even been invited. Ah, well, she must try and take things as they came. It was silly to grieve over slights unnecessarily. She took out her watch ; a quarter past three.

Caroline had had a long drive. Her home, quite in an opposite direction from Stonecourt, was twelve miles away, and she was making a round of calls. Muriel's was only a pop visit. She intended calling on Mrs. Duerdon another time.

"A quarter-past three," Muriel pondered. "Shall I go out into the village, or have a good practice ? "

She decided in favour of the latter. It was a long time since she had tried her songs over, besides she felt slightly upset in spite of all her endeavours after composure. Singing would soothe her. To ensure greater freedom from interruptions Muriel proceeded to the schoolroom. Fond as Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon were of hearing her sing they would not follow her there. The piano was getting old, but it was one of Broadwood's, and very sweet. Muriel always liked it,

for there she and Norman had sung together. She ran her fingers lightly over the keys. Her thoughts were troubled ones for more than one reason. But she roused herself, and opening her music-case took out "Strangers yet," and her rich full notes filled the room. Ever sweet, ever sad, was Muriel's voice. A glorious gift was it to her. But sing as she might her thoughts would not be hushed; they kept obtruding themselves. She was not to be invited to the dance at Stonecourt. Had it been anywhere else she would not have minded. But Alan, oh, Alan! he would be there. Did he know she was not invited? Since Caroline had divulged to Muriel the reason of Alan's absence a strange hope had lingered in the girl's lonely heart that he loved her, or else why had he gone so abruptly? Why had he spoken as he did before Mrs. Duerdon interrupted him? Why—oh why hundred of things unaccountable, inexplicable, and some of them indefinable almost. But Mrs. Worlaby's visit dispelled these ideas. How could she think Alan meant to win her when she was left out in the invitations? Perhaps since he had gone away he had found out that he could live without her. She was not his equal in the world's estimation, and he determined to conquer any partiality he might have felt. She would never forget him; he reigned sovereign there in her heart for all time. No other could ever depose him, no other ever stir its depths. She had

the flowers he had given her last carefully dried and put away; the books and little tokens highly treasured. She could live without him. She was able to endure. But oh! would life be long? She hoped the time would soon pass, and she be called to join Norman. And the sweet voice rang out with scarcely a tremor to betray her heart's emotion.

"Dance the first dance with Alan," she thought. How vain she had been. She the quiet, unpretending, plain Miss Vivian (and she spared herself no names) open the ball with the rich master of Stonecourt, handsome, winning Alan, she must have been crazy.

The door opened quietly, but Muriel was far too engrossed to hear it. Had it been noisier she doubtless had still not heard. Alan, for he it was, entered and stood behind her. What indefinable something is it that proclaims some one near? What instinct made Muriel turn round and find Alan close to her, for she had heard no sound? If she had fainted away at the suddenness of the shock, surely it would have been no wonder. If she had screamed and called out with alarm at the unexpected sight of one whom she was just trying to persuade herself was indifferent to her, who could have blamed? But she betrayed no surprise or alarm, perhaps she felt none. Her thoughts were full of him; what so natural as that he should embody them by his presence?

They met just as if they had but parted yesterday. Perhaps Alan held the small hand a little more tightly clasped, perhaps he gazed longer and more tenderly into the sweet face he loved so dearly.

"How are you, Murie?" rang out, and echoed through the latterly desolate room.

A great delight had taken possession of Muriel, a happy warm colour suffused her cheeks and brightened her eyes. Alan knew without one word what a change he had brought into the dreary monotony of her existence. And he looked so well too, so bronzed, and bearded, and handsome. Muriel could have cried aloud with joy.

Conversation flagged greatly at first. Neither of them knew what to say. Sufficient for both was the presence of the other. Oh, it was a happy meeting, and Alan could scarcely take his gaze from the sweet blushing face before him.

"Murie," and oh the charm of the old familiar name, "Murie, you look better than ever. You have not missed me much. You naughty girl, you have not missed me at all."

"Have I not, Alan? You look very well too."

"Not because I have not missed you, Murie, then. Oh my—my sister, life has been one vain yearning after you."

"I was always here. A day's journey and you could have reached me. I have not been a wanderer like you."

"How could I come with that barrier between?"—

"Which barrier?"

"Ernest Mervin."

"Do not be absurd, Alan, what has Ernest Mervin to do with you?"

"Luckily nothing, but I did not know it. I went away wildly, fiercely, jealous. It seems too foolish now. But how I have suffered."

"Caroline is married, Alan."

"So I suppose; long may she be happy. Foolish girl, what made her marry that old fogey?"

Muriel was silent; she did not care to say what she thought of the marriage. But suddenly recollecting, she said—

"She has been here this morning."

"Murie, put your music away, and let us walk in the Park. It will soon be dark though, the days are lengthening. I am glad I missed Mrs. Worlaby."

"I will not stay to attend to it now, or, Alan, you can tidy it all whilst I run for my hat."

But as she made for the door Alan caught her.

"When brother and sister meet after a long separation," he said, "do they not bestow a warmer greeting than a mere hand-clasp?"

"I—I—have no brother now. Alan let me go."

"But you have me. You are pretty ready

generally to claim the relationship when I— Well we will not explain," and he kissed her.

"Mr. Murray," exclaimed Muriel, "you must not," and she escaped under his arm. "Is that the way you usually greet your friends?"

"No, I rather think not. I have not the same excuse."

"No more sisters near you," said Muriel smoothing her hair. "But I am not your sister, Alan."

"I do not want you to be."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. Both the speech and the tone it was uttered in astonished her.

"You may look, Murie, but I mean it. I will not have you for my sister any more. I begin to think sisters are nuisances."

"I do not know," dissented Muriel, "but we can be good, true friends."

And she ran off.

Before they got into the Park Alan had a few words with Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon, but they received him rather stiffly. He thought none the less of them for it. On the contrary he rather applauded their championship of Muriel. When they were in the Park, Alan proposed—

"Murie, take my arm."

She laughed.

"No, thank you, not just yet. I am both strong enough and young enough to support myself. Have you begun?" and she stopped.

Alan was biting his lips and not looking pleased.

"I am waiting," he said.

"Why are you waiting? I am ready."

"Oh, you teaze, I want to know why you did not finish your speech."

"What speech?"

Alan laughed good-humouredly.

Oh, but it was nice having him back just the same as ever.

"Where did you go after you left Paris?" she asked. "I forget, you told us you were in Rome."

"Yes, I was there, and did everything *en règle*, kissed the Pope's toe, saw the Vatican, in fact the difficulty would be to tell where I had not been, what stupendous sights I have not seen. But nothing was half so refreshing as is one look at you. I wanted you everywhere, Murie."

"Doubtless," and she made him a grand bow. "When did you get home, Alan?"

"Only late last night. I have had lots of things to do for my mother. Great alterations are being made. Lawyers are busy, and I could only just slip off when I did by a ruse. But I could not wait any longer, Murie. Now say you are pleased to see me."

"Alan, I can easily say that; but I never can tell you how pleased"—

"That will do, that and your happy face. I forgive you for not taking my arm."

"Alan, it is not fashionable."

"Fashion be bothered. I have seen enough of styles and dress since I have been away to last me a lifetime."

"How frightfully heterodox, Alan. You are not like Caroline; she spoke most highly of our foreign friends' tastes."

"She always was weak-minded that way. Too much beauty, like too much learning, hath sent her mad."

"Alan, for shame. You do not understand. It is not weak-minded for ladies to like rich dresses. It is the right thing. I am sadly deficient in taste."

"Umph, are you. I do not believe it. But Murie, about our dance on the sixth. I keep you to your promise."

"What promise, pray?"

"That you would dance the first dance with me."

"I never made such a foolish promise. Fancy a plain nobody presuming to take the great Alan Murray, Esq., before he had asked the other grandees."

"I fail to see the presumption," said Alan with his old haughtiness. "I shall ask whom I like."

"Certainly, that is your privilege. I have an equal one to decline if I choose."

"But you never would decline?" interrogated Alan coaxingly.

"We need not enter into what I should do; there is no reason. I have not been invited."

"No, merely because I desired to bring the invitation in person. I did not wish you to be

asked on a piece of cardboard just like everybody else. But Murie, I will not ask you unless you promise me the first and ever so many more dances."

"Shall you not?"

"Most decidedly I will not."

"Then I stand a poor chance of coming. After all, dances are intended for good-looking somebodies."

"Of course. Are Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon invited?"

"I think not; but if they are they have not told me. Perhaps, though, they might scarcely like, as I had not received one."

"Fancy Mrs. Duerdon showing such thoughtfulness," exclaimed Alan merrily. "The world must come to an end first. Murie should we stroll off to Norman's grave?"

"With pleasure; the snowdrops are looking so pretty there."

And so by a strange coincidence they both visited Norman's grave together, the first day of their meeting after a long separation, whilst they had each visited it alone before as soon as their trouble had fallen on them. In joy and in sorrow they both went there. A short time they returned home again. Alan wanted to return to Stonecourt early. He promised to come again the next morning. Muriel felt as if she could not bear to let him go, but of course she did not say so.

"And about accepting our invitation?" he asked, just before leaving.

"I have received none either to accept or decline."

"I give you a most pressing one now. If you like I will go on my bended knees. Murie come."

"Do not be ridiculous, Alan. Fancy you on your knees; it would be too absurd."

"Put away the necessity, and accept."

"Your mother has not asked me."

"She shall drive over in person. Will that satisfy you, you autocratic little lady."

"I should not like to give her the trouble. A similar invitation to everybody else's will be sufficient."

"And you will come, Murie?"

"With pleasure; only you must not make me conspicuous by asking me to open the ball with you. Plenty of others will be desirous of the honour."

"Never mind what others want, I want you."

"But I cannot promise that, Alan; be considerate."

He ran off without giving his word either one way or the other.

Muriel danced round the dining-room in lightness of heart after he had gone; and there Mr. Duerdon found her. It was a novel proceeding waltzing alone in the dusk. It pleased Mr. Duerdon. He liked to see Muriel happy.

CHAPTER XV.

Alan was over early next morning, but earlier than that Muriel had received the formal invitation on the gaily printed card, and accepted it.

The Duerdons had been invited before.

"What will you be dressed in, Murie."

"I scarcely know. Alan, you are not going to take an interest in anything so paltry as dress."

Alan wisely ignored that speech.

"You looked very pretty at the Wyatts' dance when you wore pink," he said.

"Pretty!" echoed Muriel in astonishment. "It must be something very strange that makes me look pretty. I had better by all means wear pink again, if it effects such an extraordinary metamorphosis."

"No. I want you to be in your usual evening attire, white. It suits you best, you look so fair and pure in white. A snowdrop or a lily in the valley. There will be gaudy tulips, showy peonies, and loud sunflowers all around. I want my—you Muriel, to stand among them as distinct as possible from the rest—as distinct as possible, a gentle, quiet, unassuming snowdrop."

"Yet, Alan, being dressed in white will scarcely effect such a desirable result. Lots of others will

be dressed in white, girls fairer and prettier than I am," objected Muriel.

"None of them will be like you, Muriel, refined, self-possessed, aristocratic. You are my true ideal of a lady, and, therefore, I naturally take an interest in your appearance."

"I am sorry for one reason, Alan, for I am afraid I shall disappoint you. How lovely Caroline will look."

"Murie, put down that detestable fancy work. I want you to look at me when you are speaking, and it engrosses all your attention. Come, let me take it from you," and Alan jumped up and took the point lace which she was working out of her hands. Muriel looked defiant, but she said nothing. She folded her hands in resignation.

"You remember the letter I wrote you when you were in Paris?"

Alan heaved a deep sigh, and in that sigh escaped for ever all the trouble he had endured for the last few months.

"Remember it!" he exclaimed, "rather."

"Well, did I tell you then that Ernest is"—

"Stop talking about Ernest, we have plenty to chat about without him. I can see your face well now, and can study its every expression."

Muriel covered her face with both hands.

"Do look at something else," she begged. "Suppose we join Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon, they will want to talk to you."

"I daresay; but they must defer that pleasure until a more convenient season."

"By the way, Alan, I want my ring, where is it?"

He held up his hand, it was shining quietly on his little finger.

"Take it off, please."

"I could not; in fact I doubt whether it will come. It has never been removed since you put it there, and I fancy it is a fixture for ever."

"I should like it, Alan."

"So, my dear Murie, should I, and possession, you know, is nine-tenths of the law."

"You gave your word of honour that I should have it again."

"How could I tell such a calamity would arise? Would you wish my finger to be cut off?"

Muriel laughed.

"Not exactly, but I should like Norman's Mizpah to be filed off instead."

"Cruel Murie. You must wait at any rate until the dance is over, lest I be bewitched by some of those fair girls you alluded to a short time since. Then I will visit a jeweller, and submit my neck to the executioner—I beg pardon, my finger to the file, and you shall have the ring at the sacrifice, perhaps, of my life."

"Alan, I wish you would read to me. You have grown so ridiculous since your sojourn abroad. I believe that ring will come off easily."

"Will you try?" and he held out his hand.

She shook her head.

"I will not encourage indolence," she said, laughing.

"Then you must wait; 'he who will not when he may,' you know the rest."

"I do not, Alan."

"Neither, my dear, do I. Let me see, you wanted to talk to me about Ernest. How is his lordship?"

"Very dull. It is a large house to live in alone."

"You should take up your residence with him; if I recollect aright you were always a firm defender of his. He would be very pleased to have you."

Muriel's head went up haughtily.

"Why do you not go?" asked Alan, but he drew nearer to her. "You told me distinctly before I left that he loved you."

"How can you tell such an untruth. I never was so vain, or so wicked, to tell you anything of the kind. If you misunderstood my meaning, you were equally to blame with me."

"Do you mean to say that Ernest does not love you?"

"I would rather say nothing about it. He has never spoken to me on the subject."

"You have not given him the chance, I'll be bound. He is a duffer."

"I do not think so. He is a good, honest man."

"You mean he will never steal your heart, no nor anybody else's."

"I meant nothing of the sort. Ernest is sure to marry some day."

"I beg your pardon; I do not like to differ from a lady. But if you live to see Ernest married, I will eat my head. His love has been too deep for one person for him ever to care for another."

There was so much truth in this observation that Muriel hung her head. She knew well that if Ernest had not spoken out plainly it was not because he had not wanted, but simply because she would not let him. Over and over again he had let her know that she was dear to him, but she never gave him the opportunity for proposing. He was quite the sort of man too who would never love another. Not at all a general lover. Muriel felt sorry for the prospect that lay before him. If she had only known there was no cause for sorrow. Ernest's was a nature that could be satisfied with his parish and his poor; a simple, unworldly nature, perhaps, with but little desire for home-love beyond a cosy fireside and a quiet pipe. That was sufficient when he could not hope to succeed in winning Muriel. Such an idea as wooing never entered Ernest's head. It would have had to have been plain matter-of-fact sailing

with him. He would have made a steady, sedate husband. Never rapturously elated at his success; never despairingly sad at failure; always staid and unemotional. Good-bye, Ernest, we may not hope to see you again.

"Murie, do you feel sorry for your treatment of me the day when you sent me away so coldly?"

"Do not let us allude to it," pleaded Muriel, in confusion. "We were both mistaken. Let the subject rest."

"Both mistaken," repeated Alan. "No, come, come, that could not be."

"I thought you cared for Caroline, and that you were going to marry her, Alan. But let us join Mrs. Duerdon."

"You thought I—I cared for Caroline!" burst from Alan. "How could you think so, when I avoided her so only a day or so before; you could not. Good gracious! how could you?"

"I did anyway."

"That beats all I have ever heard. Your conduct that day comes plain to me now. How glad, how thankful, I am that we were both wrong," and Alan turned his blue eyes lovingly on her.

He did not care to propose precipitately, but he meant to do so soon. No longer any anxiety assailed him, for he felt pretty sure of her affection. He read her heart better after his absence. The wonder was that he had not read it before.

Several times before the famous sixth of

January Alan was over at Astley, though owing to many business affairs he was much engaged just then. His mother had managed his estate whilst he had been away. She had done it well, but still there were many things that only a master could decide. And Alan's hands were full. He found time, however, to ride over pretty frequently, and he never rested until Muriel had promised him the first dance. The important evening arrived at last. Muriel looked exceedingly well. Hers was a face that lighted up nicely. She wore a dress of rich white silk, pearls, and Christmas roses. Nothing could have been simpler in its costliness, nothing purer or ungaudy. If she had not had more than her usual colour it would have been too trying. But her eyes were brilliant with excitement, and a pretty rose colour flushed her cheeks. It never faded all the evening, it never deepened, and her complexion was as clear as alabaster. Very sweet and amiable was her smile. None in the room could come near her in refined and cultivated appearance. Many might be prettier, many handsomer, but there was a charm about her altogether that no one else had. She was just as Alan wished her to be.

Not being quite certain as to the propriety of taking the honour of the first dance with Alan, she, after much doubt and perplexity of mind, asked Mrs. Duerdon as they were driving to Stonecourt what she had better do?

"You can please yourself quite," answered the lady. "Few but what would accept. Still, Muriel, I think I would decline, but consult your inclination."

"Alan said he would wait until midnight sooner than take another partner before me," proceeded Muriel in explanation. "That is what puzzles me."

"I will put Alan all right," remarked Mr. Duerdon; "do not puzzle your little head any longer."

"Thank you very much, Uncle Fred," said Muriel, using the once familiar title. "It is very kind of you, but I think I would rather, if you do not mind, decline for myself."

So later on, when Alan, handsome and bright, in evening dress appealed for her promise, she gently, but firmly declined. It was scarcely fair of her, but she did not wish to be made conspicuous. Alan's blue eyes flashed. He walked away annoyed. He had always considered a promise of Muriel's sacred. In his anger he had forgotten to write down his name on her programme at all. It was a strange omission, and one which Muriel never noticed. Name after name was written down, and it was only when a gentleman returned it to her with a bow, and said—

"I see you have not one dance left for me," that Muriel thought of what she had done.

A partner came to claim her, and at the end of

that dance Alan walked to where she was. He detached her programme from her fan, and opened it.

"Which dances have you kept for me, Murie?" he asked, in a voice of authority, so certain was he that she had kept several.

Then she told him how sorry she was that she had carelessly allowed the names to be put down for all.

"I never thought it would have been filled so quickly," she said, apologetically.

There was a strange look on Alan's face. It was impossible to read it. Muriel looked at him piteously; she knew she had been to blame, but quite unintentionally.

"You must not be vexed with me, Alan," she almost whispered, so that no one in the vast throng around should hear. "It is my loss as much as yours. I had quite looked forward to dancing several times with you, at any rate once."

"That you did not have the last was quite your fault. I had looked forward to it for months. You must not forget that that was your promise—a broken one, alas."

"Who was your partner, Alan?"

"The Lady St. John, only daughter of the Earl of Clayton. She is a girl of immense wealth."

"Yet how simply she is dressed. She looks aristocratic, but she is not pretty."

"No, Murie, but she is exceedingly unaffected and nice."

"Everybody looks pretty," observed Muriel. "Fine feathers make fine birds, do they not, Alan?"

"It is said so. Murie, you look very taking and elegant. Do you know I cannot help blaming you for your simplicity in letting your programme be filled. A pearl amongst diamonds. Gentlemen have not such bad taste that they could not find you out."

"The diamonds are more dazzling and valuable," returned Muriel, quietly. "Your simile was a good one, Alan, except that I fear I can lay no claim to be considered a pearl."

"The fairest, purest one amongst a lot of paste diamonds," said Alan. "Murie, who are you dancing this with?"

"Captain Stormer."

"I cannot see him. Have just one round with me first."

What could she do but comply, and not only one round, but several, and then Alan led her to Mrs. Duerdon.

Captain Stormer came up directly after, and claimed her. He made no allusion to having seen her as Alan's partner. He was either a very strange or a very wise man. Afterwards Murie thought he had done it out of kindness, seeing how the land lay. He was an engaged man himself; shortly about to be married.

After that Alan came no more near Muriel. His time was fully occupied with one and another, but he was continually with Lady St. John, and people whispered what a fine couple they would make, and some one said that they were engaged. She was very tall and well made.

Muriel heard this repeated so often that she began to wonder, but still she did not credit it. Was it at all likely that Alan would talk to her as he did if he were either engaged or about to become so?

"Murray is a lucky fellow, is he not?" commented one of two gentlemen standing near.

"Lucky, I should just think he is. Why even that St. John girl seems taken with him. She has been brought up so simply that I daresay they would let Murray have her. He is rich enough in"—

And just then Muriel's partner led her round again in the giddy dance. She had heard enough.

Mrs. Murray and Sir Phillip were not at the ball. Several people wondered; some one remarked that it was not etiquette, but it seemed strange to have the dance just the night before they were married, and they not to be there. Why not have had it after the wedding was over?

Muriel could not help watching Alan, and wondering whether the wealth of Lady St. John would attract him. Certainly they were very much together, but then she was an earl's daughter, and earls' daughters are scarce. Muriel had never met one before, yet in spite of herself

she was drawn to the unpretending grace and gentle deportment of the Lady St. John. But she grew tired of seeing Alan bestow so much attention on one person.

Early after supper she sought Mrs. Duerdon, and asked if she were not ready to go home. The question startled Mrs. Duerdon.

"Is it possible, Muriel, that you would rather go home?" she asked. "Leave this brilliant scene, the delightful music, and lovely faces? When I was your age nothing could have drawn me away. You have had plenty of partners too. I should be sorry to spoil your evening. You look so fresh and charming. I suppose you think I am very tired, but I can wait."

Was that Mrs. Duerdon who was speaking? Could it be? Mr. Duerdon quite pricked up his ears.

"I would rather go," answered Muriel, and her tone, though she was unaware of it, betrayed weariness.

Mrs. Duerdon turned to her husband.

"Muriel had better not leave so early," he said, "it would be a pity. She looks so nice that I feel proud of her to-night, and she must be enjoying herself. I have ordered the carriage for you, Clara, thinking you would scarcely be wise to stay longer. Mrs. Wyatt saw my dilemma about Muriel, and has kindly offered to leave her at our house. They drive by the lodge gates, so it will not be much out of their way."

"But there is no necessity to trouble her" persisted Muriel. "I would rather leave now, indeed I would."

There was an earnestness in Muriel's voice that struck conviction to the Duerdons. She was allowed to leave—her opera cloak was on, a hood carelessly thrown over her head, and she stood outside the attiring room waiting for Mrs. Duerdon. There were so many maids there that Muriel had escaped. She moved on to the foot of the staircase, little expecting to see any one but servants, when she was startled by Alan's appearance. He did not look altogether pleased. A genuine look of surprise covered Muriel's face. How had he found out so quickly that she was leaving.

"Murie, why are you leaving so early," he asked rather coldly. "Are you not enjoying yourself."

A slight pause.

"It was not my fault that we were not partners," he went on. "You decided that it should be so, Murie. I trust you have had a happy evening."

"I am tired, Alan," replied Muriel truthfully, "and Aunt Clara, as you know, is not very strong."

"Tired!" echoed Alan, "you tired, Murie; I never heard of such a thing from your lips before. Surely dear," and he spoke very gently, "you have liked the music and your partners, and everything, Snowdrop Muriel."

Muriel drew herself up and tried to avoid meet-

ing his eye. She could not bear to see the handsome face scanning her, searching her thoughts. Why would he persist in paying her compliments; she did not want them.

"I suppose the gay scene and the busy throng has tired me, Alan. I am not accustomed to much gaiety." But Muriel knew her answer was an evasive one. Her true reason for feeling fatigue was because she had been separated from Alan. She toyed with her fan.

Alan touched it. "Let me have this, Murie; I will be careful of it."

"You have my Mizpah ring, Alan."

"But I want this also, if I cannot prevail on you to remain. I will return them both to you, if possible, to-morrow evening. I must not come until after the departure of the bride and bridegroom."

Muriel detached the fan from her sash at once, and gave it to him with a smile, and without asking any more questions. His curious whim amused her.

"You look very like Norman to-night," remarked Alan leaning towards her. "And when you smile the resemblance is perfect."

"Thank you very much for the compliment. You could not have said anything that would please me better," said Muriel with a beaming face. Her fatigue was quite gone. Alan gave her a searching look.

"You know, Muriel, that"—

He broke off abruptly, and without another word left her. What had he been going to say. Why had he stopped so suddenly. She turned round, and Mrs. Duerdon was behind.

"Was that Alan?" questioned she. "He will be missed if he leaves the ball-room."

"He wanted us to stay longer," said Muriel in explanation. "Mr. Duerdon will be tired of waiting for us, will he not?"

Several other carriages besides the Duerdons' were at the door. Muriel remarked it.

"The elderly people get tired," said Mr. Duerdon. "They have not dancing to attract them as it did you, Muriel. Where was Caroline, I did not see her."

"No, neither did I!" exclaimed Muriel in sudden recollection.

"Mr. Worlaby was taken unexpectedly ill, and she was obliged to remain with him. She is making a more dutiful wife than I expected," explained Mrs. Duerdon.

Muriel's heart echoed that sentiment. It must be something great that would keep Caroline away unless she had altered greatly. But weeks later Muriel found out that not Mr. Worlaby's serious attack of indigestion detained Caroline, but the non-arrival of her dress from Worth's. The compensation had even failed.

CHAPTER XVI.

For days and days after that memorable Twelfth Night Muriel studiously avoided being alone with Alan. Try as he would he never could see her only in the presence of either Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon. It was most trying of her. She would not go for a walk. She would not sing for him. She would not do anything unless a third person was present. She always made some excuse. Alan began to lose paitence. The sunny blue of his eye dimmed—he grew puzzled. Yet her manner remained just the same as ever. She was always gentle and kind, yet somehow there was a reserve he had never noticed before. A stately visit to Caroline in her married home of ten days, and then an illness took up the time, and the days went on to Muriel's birthday, and yet Alan had never had the chance to speak. He might have written, but he preferred waiting. Muriel had grown so quiet that Mrs. Duerdon thought that if she invited a few friends to tea it might rouse her. Only a small quiet party in Muriel's sitting-room, the new name for the schoolroom. There was a difficulty in finding out whom to invite, and out of the five selected Ernest Mervin alone accepted. So they put him

off until another time. Muriel sat in her sitting-room alone. Her dress was most becoming, black velvet trimmed with point lace, a small knot of ruby at her throat, and a flower in her hair. Seldom she dressed so much, but it was a festal day, and Sarah thought her young mistress ought to observe it. Becoming attire was the result. Dusk was coming on, and Muriel turned from the window to the fire. She had not sat there long when the door opened, and Alan unannounced walked into the room. He had caught her at last. But not so easily. Muriel did not choose to be thus entrapped. Privately down deep in the recesses of her heart she had despised Alan since the night of the ball, despised him for his mercenary behaviour, as far as Miss St. John was concerned. She felt that he loved her, and her only; yet for greater rank and position he was trying to win the Earl's daughter. Muriel quite forgot that she had very small grounds to go on. A few hours—a short conversation overheard —were all. Certainly in those few hours she had witnessed Alan paying great attention to Miss St. John. But had not her position almost demanded it. Besides, if there had been no one else he could not have had Muriel, she being otherwise engaged, so it was somewhat unjust of her to judge him so harshly and unfairly. These suppositions of hers had been all that had kept her from allowing him the old friendly intercourse. A silent war waged

in her as he entered her presence unannounced, and she nerved herself to speak out bravely, and to dismiss him if he ventured to speak a word of himself or his hopes.

"Many happy returns of the day, Murie," said Alan, taking hold of the cold hand held out to him. "You did not think I had forgotten you?"

His question remained unanswered. Muriel stood in evident indecision.

"I have brought you a little souvenir which I hope you will like. It is so pretty. Open it, dear."

But Muriel put the small parcel carelessly on the table without removing the paper covers. She apparently took not the least notice. Alan was annoyed, but he had a difficult game to play. He was not going to lose all by the failure of a single trick. He was determined to win or lose all that day.

"It is very good of you, Alan, to remember my birthday," remarked Muriel, quietly. "I almost began to think you had forgotten me. Let us go to the drawing-room."

Mrs. Duerdon was there, and in numbers there was safety.

"Thought I had forgotten you," exclaimed Alan —"your birthday that is." He ignored the latter part of the speech altogether; but she moved towards the door. Alan did not run up to it and place his back against it as on a former occasion, but he laid his hand detainingly on Muriel's shoulder.

"I wish to speak to you," he said. "Remain here for a few minutes."

Muriel's face flushed, and the firelight flickered and showed it off. Still she was not to be beaten.

"You can speak to me, Alan, as well in the drawing-room as in here," she said, with an uneasy laugh. "Mrs. Duerdon will want me."

"A short half-hour more or less will make but little difference to her. She has you always."

"Not so; beside it is cold." Alan felt the small hand that was playing nervously with her pocket-handkerchief. Instead of being cold she was very warm now.

"Another of your hundred and one plausible excuses," he declared, looking down with his bright blue eyes into her face. But her head was turned away—she would not look at him.

"You will stay, Murie, for a short time?" he asked, coaxingly.

"I cannot; you can come over another time, Alan; Mrs. Duerdon will be quite vexed as it is."

Had not the question at stake been of such vast importance, a subject almost of life and death, Alan might have humoured the whim that seemed to possess Muriel. But he had waited long enough. He could not endure the suspense any longer. What did all her strange behaviour mean. Surely never had maiden before been so coy, so difficult to woo.

"Excuse me, Murie," he said, sternly, "I can-

not let you off any more, you have evaded me time after time until my patience, never very strong, is all worn away. You must stay and listen to me now. Forgive me, my darling, if I speak harshly. I do not mean it. You will not compel me to detain you against your will. Say that you will stay."

In all humility Muriel bowed her head. She meant it as a sign of acquiescence. No longer would he be put off. What was he going to say? Propose to her—or tell her of his engagement to Lady St. John. Her heart beat to suffocation. She moved farther away from the firelight into the dusk of the room, and sank into a chair. She would willingly have placed miles between herself and Alan just then, had it been possible.

Not so Alan, he walked straight to where she was, and taking another chair quite close, sat down in it. He was near enough to take her hand or to study each feature of the face, and he placed himself so that the light from the fire helped his scrutiny. Muriel pushed her chair gently. It went a short way farther ; she had no wish to be deliberately rude, yet any one to have heard her speak just then might have thought she did both from her speech, her manner, and her tone.

"I do not know why you should presume to seek me out in this way, Alan. I have never given you the privilege lately."

"I have taken French leave then, Murie. But you

know you never used to object. See, this is my excuse," and with one hand he held up her white carved ivory fan, whilst with the other he sought to draw her nearer to him. "I can at last return it to you," he said. "More than two months have gone by, and day by day I have waited for an opportunity. Never say I am not a patient man again. Murie, I made an inward vow that night of our dance, when I took this from you that I would not place it back into your hands again until you had answered a question. Do you guess what question I would ask?"

Muriel went crimson.

"Miss Bradshaw is coming back to live at her own cottage next week," began she eagerly. "She was to have come much sooner, only"—

"Was she dear? We will talk about that presently. I have something most momentous to ask you; never mind her just now."

But Muriel was anxious to give a turn to the conversation.

"My ring," she said, "my Mizpah, oh, please let me have it back. I do not care for the fan."

Alan captured one of Muriel's hands just then, and held it tightly clasped.

"You shall have them both together," he said, meaningly. "I love that ring also, Murie. It seems a link that connects you and me and Norman together. I cannot part with it until—until"—and his voice faltered. There was a dead pause.

for a minute. Dark gradually filled the room. The fire was subsiding and threw out but little light, yet that little was sufficient to show Muriel's features. Alan watched her keenly. Deeply moved himself, he wished to trace some emotion on her face, but it betrayed none of her feelings. She had kept them too long under control to let them escape her when she most wished to hide them. Her eyes, the only expressive feature that would not be curbed, she kept fixed steadfastly on anything rather than on him, so he had no chance of reading their meaning.

"Murie," he said, at last, speaking very earnestly, "the house is very lonely for me since my mother left. I have no one to speak to. I feel dreadfully dull, the rooms are so large and empty —and only me"—

"You have plenty of friends, Alan, you ought to be happy."

"I have a very dear friend who will not vouchsafe me one kind word or look. My heart is hungry, starving, yet not one gentle pat will she bestow. Her large dog is better off than I."

Muriel vainly endeavoured to extricate her hand from the strong clasp that held it. She sat and shivered.

"Murie, darling, I am thinking of getting married."

"That is no news," answered Muriel, in a strange and constrained voice. "I wonder you

did not tell me before. Other people did though. Gentlemen who can mate with earls' daughters need not make long wooing."

"Of course not," answered Alan, genially, thinking she was speaking generally. "Murie, my wooing has been one of the longest. No man ever sought a bride more persistently and with less encouragement. None waded through greater difficulties than I have done. I deserve my reward. Murie, say I do. Tell me what you think."

Muriel cleared her throat, it felt thick and husky.

"I think, Mr. Murray, if Lady St. John has been as difficult to win as you seem to think, and has never sought to gain your affection, that she deserves to be yours if—mind, I say if—you love her sufficiently to make her happy."

Muriel gazed steadily and earnestly at Alan as she spoke. Her voice never faltered, her eyes never flinched. Alan, on the contrary, stared as if she had ten heads; stared and stared. What did she mean? He was quite bewildered. Never having had any intention of wooing the Lady Gertrude St. John, he did not grasp Muriel's meaning. The idea of his name ever being or having been coupled with hers had never entered his head. So full was he of one idea alone that he was quite dense. Muriel saw his bewilderment.

"You and Lady Gertrude," she said, in explanation.

A light broke in on the darkness suddenly.

"By Jove, Murie," he exclaimed, eagerly, "there is some mistake again. Lady Gertrude is to be married next month to some wealthy commoner, I forget his name, but the affair is making a great stir in high quarters. How is it you have not heard?"

"And his name, Alan?"

"My dear, I forget it; but if you are interested in the Lady Gertrude I will find out for you. It is in the *Queen* and *Court Journal,* the announcement I mean."

"Alan, are you very disappointed?"

"What about?"

"Her marriage, to be sure."

"Slightly so. I expected she would have preferred a nobleman. It is a thorough love-match, I believe."

"I thought—I was told—I heard," faltered Muriel.

"Yes, Murie, you heard"—

"That you and she were—were engaged!" blurted out Muriel, at length.

"And you believed it, Muriel, actually believed it!" Alan's tone was full of reproof, tender, loving reproof. "Murie, did you not read me better?"

Muriel's eyes drooped with their gladness. A joy entered her heart. Never again would she be lonely, desolate, and she knew it then, but she made no answer.

"Murie, my darling," said Alan, "have you

not seen for years where my affection has been placed—whom I have loved with all the strength of my manhood—whom I have"— He paused.

The scene was getting too strong for Muriel. She must betray herself if he did not speak out definitely. Summoning the remnant of independence that she could still muster, she tossed her head defiantly, yet nervously, and uttered, "Well?"

The word put in the interrogative implied so much.

"Well!" he reiterated, in amazement, "do you term it well to make a strong stalwart fellow like myself dance attendance morning, noon, and night, month in—aye, year in year out, on a dainty little lady, Murie? Have you no pity that you draw me here time after time merely to twine me round your fingers—receive me coldly, perhaps, or, if with a smile, repent of it as soon as it is given, and send me away broken-hearted?"

"Alan, it is nearly dinner-time."

"You would let me leave again without having anything definite said. But I am not to be beguiled. Murie, why are you so hard-hearted?"

"I am not hard-hearted, Alan. I have never meant to be unkind. I thought you cared for—for Lady St. John latterly." She had nearly alluded to Caroline, but she wished that time to be forgotten.

"What ever made you think I liked Lady Gertrude?" inquired Alan. "You never had any reason."

"Oh, yes, I had. Look how you danced with her the night before your mother's wedding. Every one was saying something about you, and I"—

"Was that the reason you left so early?"

"It was."

"Yet, Murie, who was to blame that night. You behaved badly to me. What else could I do? Moreover I did not pay her much more attention than any one else. Of course her position called for deference and respect."

Muriel murmured something in acquiescence.

"Besides, if you remember, darling, directly you left the ball-room, at least at the first available instant, I was after you begging you to stay longer. That did not look like caring for Lady St. John, I got your fan. I could not have let you go without some token. I meant to propose to you the next day, and you would not let me come near you and you have been treating me so ever since. Of course if you had not been ill and away I should have insisted on coming to an understanding long since. Muriel, you were not ill grieving about me, were you?" The tones were dangerously tender.

"I was sorry that you were going to marry for wealth and position," answered Muriel. "It seemed so sad that an honourable, upright gentleman should forfeit love."

"You did not think I loved Lady Gertrude, Murie?"

"No; I knew you did not."

Muriel's voice was so low that Alan could scarcely hear it, and her foot was beating the carpet in her agitation. Even then she would gladly have run away, anywhere, so that she did not have to answer him.

"You knew I did not. Thank you, my pearl. Some people might not think I had much to thank you for there. But I am glad you judged me right even as far as that. You know whom I love?"

No answer.

"Murie, tell me—whisper low. Whom do I love?"

Still no answer; only a restless movement as if impatient at the questioning.

"I have no need to look for wealth or position," continued Alan, proudly. "I am glad to own it. Yet Muriel, if I wanted both I do not know better where I could have gained them than by courting you. No higher, statelier lady is there in the land than Muriel Vivian."

"Don't, Alan. Oh, please don't talk such rubbish. I am a mere nobody; an adopted daughter; a plain, ordinary girl. Look at things dispassionately."

"Murie, my little love, I am not a soft fellow as some men are. I cannot talk sweet sentiment and pay unmeaning compliments. Neither would you desire them. But I love you for ever and aye.

Had you treated me as you treated Ernest Mervin I should have left you long since. Yet with all your coolness my reception was always different to his. I am no simpleton am I? I venture to hope that you will care for me—a little bit—Murie."

"I have always treated Ernest Mervin politely."

"Decidedly so—too politely—he might have taken his congé some time ago if he had had the least sense."

"Yet, Alan, you condescended to be jealous of him."

"Aye, so I did; and shall be of every one until I have won you, my sweet girl. By the way, Murie, you refused me the last time I proposed."

"I never did," she answered indignantly.

He laughed softly at that innocent avowal; his heart was gay. It had need to be—he was gaining a prize.

"Yes, Murie, you refused me once. I scarcely know whether I dare venture again."

"I never did refuse you," denied Muriel again.

But her voice was so low that Alan had to bend his head down to catch it. She drew her hand away and covered her face. He felt rather than saw the movement. In an instant he was kneeling by her side.

"Murie—my darling—my love," he pleaded; "may I venture to hope. Will you come and nestle close in my heart, close for evermore; my love for years and years to come as you have been

in years past? Only mine to be loved and guarded more tenderly year by year as it passes. One word, my darling, only one: say you will be my wife."

Muriel tried to say "Yes" but she could not. No voice would come, so great was her emotion.

Alan waited patiently for an instant. Then the fire flickered up as if in harmony, and he saw two tears rolling down her cheeks. That was more than he could bear. He gently lifted the hands away, and taking out his handkerchief wiped them off. Then he raised her head and made her meet his bright blue eyes.

"Say, 'Alan, I love you,'" he pleaded.

But she shook her head. It did not daunt him.

"Just 'Yes' then, Murie; you are keeping me in fearful suspense. I am a brave fellow, but this tries me."

Then Muriel stood up, and though her face remained slightly in shadow, Alan could imagine the noble look that he knew, the earnest, patient look, that he loved so well on the girlish face.

"I love you, Alan," she said proudly, "and have done for years; you have always been so gentle and considerate to me. No brighter future could I wish than to be with you as long as my life shall last—no sweeter prospect than that of ever being by your side."

"Thank you, my darling," he answered, his tone a reverent one; "may God watch over us

both as I shall guard and cherish you. No trouble that I can avert shall come near you."

"Good Alan," murmured Muriel. "Troubles will come; none are exempt from them, neither would I desire that we should be. They are oftentimes blessings in disguise. But we both know whom to trust, and we can bear them together."

"You have heard about silver being refined, Murie?"

"Of course I have," she answered wonderingly.

"And you know when it has passed a certain process that it needs no longer refining, it is taken out of the fire?"

"Yes, Alan," she said gently. She began to catch his meaning.

"My darling, you are like the refined silver. You need no longer the purifying process. Your nature, through much trial, has become perfect."

"You are greatly mistaken, Alan; indeed you are," declared Muriel earnestly. "I have faults many and serious, and they need much correcting."

Alan said no more. Instead, he folded his arms around and drew her to him, showering kiss after kiss on the sweet face. She suffered it for a short time, then, with her usual impulsiveness, got away.

"What a happy birthday this has been," she exclaimed. "Alan, I cannot realize my happiness; are you sure it is not all a dream?"

"Is it the happiest you have ever spent?" he asked, "the very happiest of all?"

There was a slight pause.

"I scarcely know," she replied, in a low tone; "there is no Norman now. Oh, Alan, together we must strive to join him."

"We will, darling. But, Murie, you love me more than Norman now?" and Alan asked the question all jealously.

"I do not know, Alan; I love him very dearly. But you need not think of that. You love him too, and—he is in heaven."

Even at that moment, in the midst of her happiness, it was almost a sob that escaped her at the memory of him. Would that he had been there to share her joy.

A servant entered the room to light the gas. She would have withdrawn quickly when she saw the room was tenanted, but Muriel bid her perform her work. She and Alan went to join Mrs. Duerdon in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XVII.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Duerdon were pleased when they were told of Alan's and Muriel's engagement. One time it had been an affair that was expected, but latterly they had both been perplexed what to think. The young people were difficult to read. Mr. Duerdon all along, with the exception of a few weeks when his faith was shaken, declared positively that Alan wished to win Muriel; but Mrs. Duerdon, with a contrary belief, denied that most strenuously. She affirmed that the love was all on Muriel's side; the thing, she said, spoke for itself. If Alan loved Muriel, why did he not propose.

"Perhaps he has done, my dear, and been rejected."

A most emphatic disavowal from Mrs. Duerdon.

"How blind, how dense are men," she contemptuously declared. "Would Alan continue coming over if he had been repulsed? Was it likely?"

"I should, my dear, were I in his shoes. Muriel is well worth winning. Whoever gets her may rejoice."

"And is not Alan worth catching. Answer me that. Is there a girl in the whole country round who would not jump at Alan?"

"He is a noble young fellow; they would make

a nice couple. Heigho! I cannot make them out."

And shortly after that the engagement took place.

"Was I not right?" asked Mrs. Duerdon, in triumph.

"We were both right and both wrong, my dear," answered Mr. Duerdon blandly. "If the love had been on one side only, an engagement would never have taken place."

There was nothing for which to postpone the wedding day. Never two people lived in whose way existed less impediments. No parents, no brothers or sisters to raise a dissentient voice. Muriel feared that Lady Philip Verdun would not be pleased; that good woman had not been over gracious after Alan's departure for the Continent. But Muriel was mistaken; Lady Philip Verdun rejoiced. In one way it made but little difference to her, in another it affected her much. Alan was her much-beloved son: his happiness and welfare she held greatly at heart. Muriel was the lady of his choice; therefore as Alan was the one whose taste had to be consulted, it was the best thing that could have happened. Full of her own interests and concerns, and with but little time to devote to Alan, Lady Philip Verdun could not help being pleased that he was taken off her hands in the way that suited him best. Perhaps she would rather that he had chosen a more beauteous and

grander bride, but people's tastes differ; and if Lady Verdun could not influence Alan's choice whilst she lived with him daily, was it likely that she could effect much when living at some little distance, and only meeting her son occasionally? Alan wished to be married in May, but that Muriel peremptorily declined, saying that no wedding which took place in May was ever considered lucky. Alan laughed at her and called her superstitious. She joined in his merriment, but remained firm. She could afford to be laughed at.

"Then we must hasten events, and be married in April," said sly Alan.

"Not until June," replied Muriel.

And nothing could move her from her fixed determination; and so it was finally fixed that early in June the wedding should take place, Ernest Mervin and a college friend of Alan's officiating.

Muriel communicated all this to Mrs. Duerdon, little expecting the storm that was to come on her head. Naturally, she thought that the news would be acceptable after the way in which the announcement of her engagement had been received. But Mrs. Duerdon was indignant beyond measures.

"Leave me!" she shrieked; "how can you think of such a thing. You are as selfish as ever. Who is to look after me?"

"I thought, Aunt Clara, that you were pleased

at my engagement," replied Muriel with a strange sinking at her heart.

"So I was, and am; but an engagement is one thing, a wedding another. I never expected you to leave me until I died. Is this the return you make for all my goodness to you?"

Muriel sighed; it was such an old vexed question that of her ingratitude.

"I do not think Alan will wait very long."

"Let him go then. Who has been kindest to you, he or I?"

Muriel's heart answered, "He he; a thousand times," but she did not give utterance to the thought.

"I suppose you think he has; but wait a while and you will see. A few years and your verdict will be different."

"Never, never," spoke up Muriel's heart again. But she was so happy and confident in her love that she could let all Mrs. Duerdon's remarks pass harmlessly by.

"I will tell Alan that you wish him to wait for me, Aunt Clara. I feel sure that your opposition will be most unexpected to him as it was to me."

"Oh, yes; go and tell him a lot of tales and set him against me. That is just you, Muriel. As if he cares what I wish. Tell him that you would rather wait yourself; that I am delicate, and require nursing."

Muriel clasped her hands together in perplexity. She was between two fires—Alan's and Mrs. Duerdon's opposite wishes.

"I think that somebody else would look after you as well as I can," she almost whispered. "Alan will be angry if I put him off again, and" —inaudibly—"I would rather not."

In her mind's eye rose the sunny home of Stonecourt contrasted with the weary fretfulness of Astley Park's mistress. A vision of Alan, tall, strong, noble, ever by her side to share all trouble and to shield, as far as lay in his power, all annoyance and harm. It was a comforting reflection.

Mrs. Duerdon's wrath waxed vehement, but it glided off Muriel. Everything would come right somehow; Alan would manage all. And it did come right, but without Alan's intervention.

Mr. Duerdon had long known that his wife would not spare Muriel without much lamentation and mourning. It was scarcely likely, considering her character and Muriel's usefulness and unselfishness, that she should be expected to do so. The only wonder was that she should have rejoiced at first in the engagement. But then, as she had freely confessed to Muriel, an engagement was different to a wedding. She did not object to Alan coming over to Astley as much as he liked, but she did strongly dislike Muriel leaving her and going over to Stonecourt. In this dilemma Mr. Duerdon had a plan. He proposed that Miss Brad-

shaw should be petitioned to fill Muriel's place. But knowing his wife's strange obstinacy, he did not go straight to her and unfold his scheme. If he had have done it would never have answered. No; for once Mr. Duerdon tried stratagem. First he obtained an invitation for Muriel from Caroline to spend a few days with her, for it was necessary for the success of his scheme that Muriel should be out of the way; then he induced Mrs. Duerdon to invite Miss Bradshaw to stay with them.

"You will be lonely, my dear," he remarked, innocently; "Miss Bradshaw will be better than no one."

"I am likely to be lonely for ever and nobody care," rejoined Mrs. Duerdon, in an injured tone.

Nevertheless, she was brought to see that some companionship was better than none. The ex-governess was invited. Retiring and a thorough gentlewoman, she soon gained a footing in Mrs. Duerdon's good graces—much as she had done formerly. Only being brought into closer contact, Mrs. Duerdon learned to appreciate Miss Bradshaw's kindness of heart, and long before Muriel returned home—her visit extending to over a fortnight—Mrs. Duerdon declared that if Miss Bradshaw would remain with her altogether, Muriel might get married as soon as she chose. This aspect of affairs was agreeable to everybody, and Mr. Duerdon chuckled over the success of his plan.

Miss Bradshaw sold her cottage and furniture—

a good offer occurring just then—invested all her money in a good bank, and accepted the house and liberal salary which Mr. Duerdon intended should be hers. And if, in after-years, she did not succeed in pleasing Mrs. Duerdon as well as Muriel had done, it was not through want of perseverance (she always tried her best) but because, as the mistress of Astley Park declared, there never was, there never could be any children like "Millicent's children," Norman and Muriel would never be surpassed, not even by Owen.

So, after all, Alan and Muriel were married. One more peep at them ere we bid each other farewell. Years have gone by—seven bright, happy years spent at Stonecourt. Muriel stood on the sunny lawn there one day in early June. She looked almost the same as ever, only happier—her face rounder, more peaceful-looking, and, if possible, she appeared younger. Alan was not far off—he never was far away from Muriel. He had grown broader and stouter; the regular country squire. Muriel held a child by each hand—two sturdy little boys, Bertram and Alan. A little distance farther away was Norman, the eldest son, trying to ride a pony, Sultan by name—one we have seen before. A groom held Sultan, who still kept some of his old proud ways. Norman, a tall, straight boy, upright as a dart, and very like his father, with the same blue eyes, the same nut-brown curly hair, was rather impatient of control.

One word from his father, however, set him right. High-spirited, yet loving and obedient, were Alan's three sons. Sultan started off quietly round the gravel. Alan eyed it, then turned to Muriel—the old love-light still in his eyes. If he loved her years ago, he worshipped her now. Her utter unselfishness and gentleness, her self-unconsciousness and grace, kept him ever enthralled. In his eyes she was perfect; her will was law, yet she bore all her honours so meekly that no one would guess her power, perhaps; many a time, none less than Alan. He had a very strong will, unbending and determined; yet he was ever gentle and considerate to her—a true marriage was theirs.

"Well, Murie, are you not proud of your eldest son? He rides like a thorough Briton, though he is only six years old."

She nodded her head smilingly.

"May I ride too, papa?" asked Bertram, the next boy, leaving hold of his mamma's hand and going round to his father. "Jackson says he will teach both Alan and me, but Alan is so small."

"Me too," lisped the youngest little fellow, who was the exact image of Norman Vivian.

His mother held the little hand tightly within hers: he was the dearest of her children, though her affection was so great for all that she scarcely knew it.

"Baby Alan too small," she answered, kissing

the little face. "Jackson is turning out of the grounds with Norman."

"You two run to nurses," said Alan; "they are going towards the poultry yard. Now, Murie love, I have you to myself again."

She took his arm.

"Have the flowers gone to Astley?" she inquired.

"Sure to have done; but we will go and inquire."

The old custom of sending flowers to Norman's grave had been kept up all these years. The love that Muriel felt for her gifted brother would last as long as she lives. She tells her boys many a time of their uncle's goodness, and how God called him early away from this world. She does not let his life and memory lie idle; they teach much, and each little boy tries to follow his example. If one of them is naughty she says, "Uncle Norman would never have done so." And the boys in turn, when inclined to be disobedient or wilful, asks, "Mamma, am I like Uncle Norman now?" and the shake of her head is as good as any reproof to them.

"We shall have the house full soon, little wife, to celebrate the anniversary of our wedding. When do they all come?"

"Sir Philip and Lady Verdun to-morrow; your sister and husband on Thursday: the Duerdons may be over to-day. How nice it is that Miss Bradshaw can come too."

"Well, Murie, shall you not be at all shy; or are you growing braver, darling?"

"I am never afraid when you are near, Alan. How could I be? You are always so kind and good."

"Dear little Murie! I declare if those two stately nurses of yours were not coming towards us with the youngsters, I would give you a kiss. I've half a mind as it is."

Muriel laughed merrily.

"What a dreadful threat," she remarked, placidly.

"You look so pretty, Murie—such a lovely colour in your cheeks."

"Delusion, dear Alan; simply delusion. Where did you purchase your magnifying spectacles?"

"Never mind where, but they make you look lovely."

"I wish, Alan, you could lend them to Mr. Worlaby."

"I wish I could, love. Poor Caroline," he said, commiseratingly. "Are you coming to look at baby, Murie."

"Our fat little daughter," laughed Muriel. "She will be very happy sucking her thumb; if she saw me she might not be so contented. Let us go the other way."

Alan looked slightly rueful. If Muriel was proud of her sons, Alan was delighted with his

daughter. He had never seen a more beautiful baby, so he declared.

Muriel caught her husband's expression.

"Have a peep at great fat baby, Alan," she said laughingly. "I cannot think how it is she is so plump."

"She has something to grow out of," replied Alan proudly. "She has no intention of making such a little woman as her much-respected mother, you little dot."

"Not so very small," dissented Muriel composedly. "Certainly I am not as tall as your mother and sister, but I shall pass muster. And what care I what I am so long as you love me, Alan." Her husband clasped her hand tightly. "All your goodness and kindness," continued Muriel, with emotion. "Oh, my husband, what would my life have been without you? I was so solitary after dear Norman's death; I cannot think what I should have been if—if"—A pause. "And now, Alan, we are daily drawing nearer joining him again. As lovely as our lives are here, they will be more lovely hereafter. As of Jonathan and David, 'lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths they were not divided.'"

"No need to wonder, darling, what might have been; we will be truly thankful for what is. I am glad if I have succeeded in making you happy. I can truly say no man was ever more blessed in

his life than I am. Oh, Muriel, would that there were more unselfish characters like yours in the world. Earth would be a better place; heaven more easily reached; 'Millicent's children' guileless and blessed."

"Papa! mamma!" was shouted out; "Cousin Owen has come, and he wants you."

Here, gentle reader, we will leave them, happy in each other and blessed in their love. Storms may, nay, must come. Winds will sweep over them, but together they can be borne. Their love is founded on a rock; the everlasting arms surround them. They acknowledge a higher power than any in this world; and they are happy and safe whatever betides.

THE END.

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